31st Anniversary Issue

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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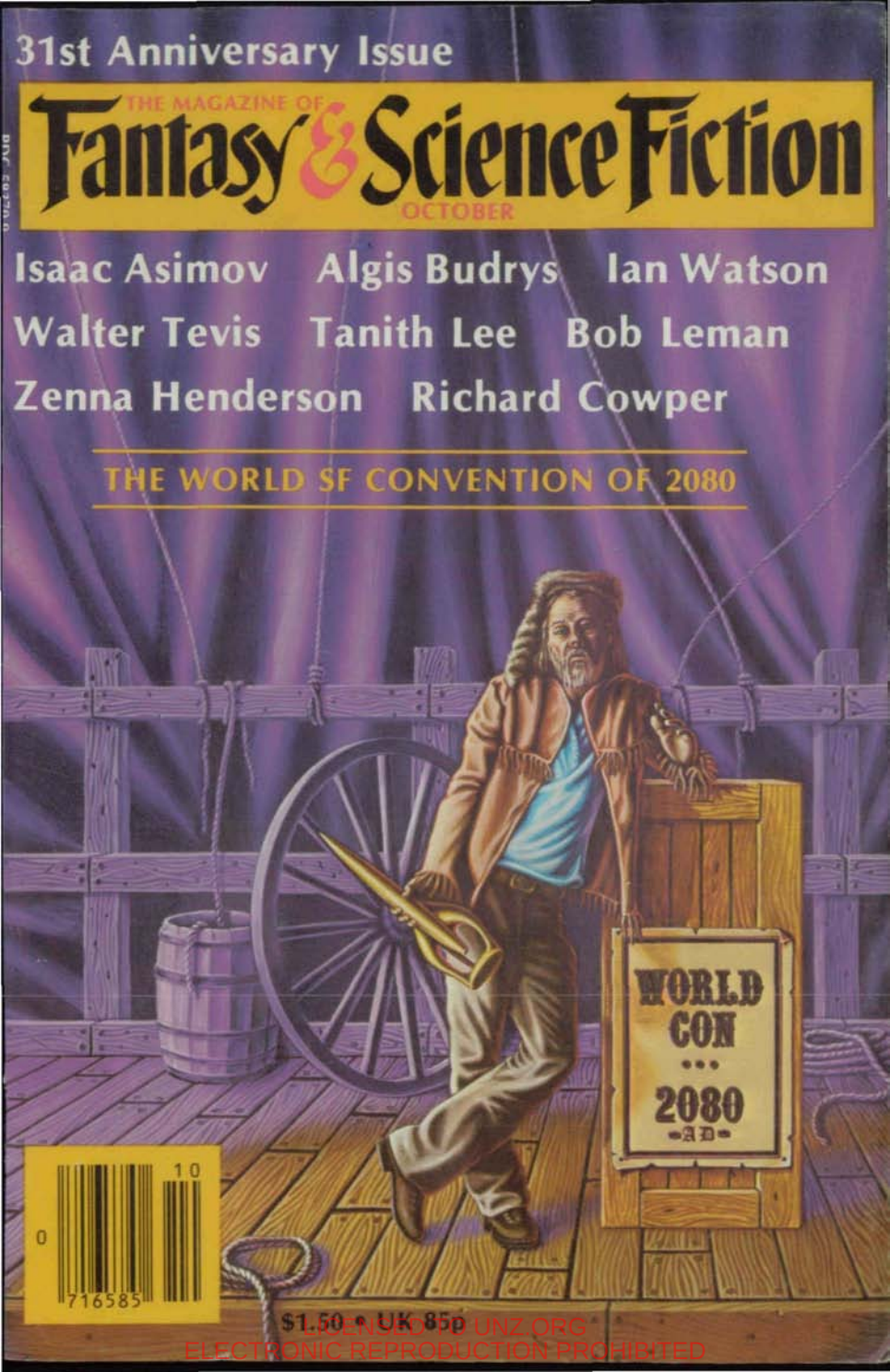
Walter Tevis Tanith Lee Bob Leman

Zenna Henderson Richard Cowper

THE WORLD SF CONVENTION OF 2080



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NOVELLA

TELL US A STORY	6	**Zenna Henderson**

NOVELETS

THE ATTLEBOROUGH POLTERGEIST	68	**Richard Cowper**
WOLFLAND	97	**Tanith Lee**
FEESTERS IN THE LAKE	132	**Bob Leman**

SHORT STORIES

ECHO	42	**Walter Tevis**
THE WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION OF 2080	63	**Ian Watson**
DEATH OF A FOY	95	**Isaac Asimov**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	55	**Algis Budrys**
CARTOON	67	**Gahan Wilson**
FILMS: Tations—Incan & Recan	92	**Baird Searles**
SCIENCE: The Word I Invented	122	**Isaac Asimov**

COVER BY BARCLAY SHAW FOR "THE WORLD SF CONVENTION OF 2080"

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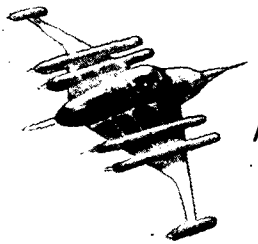

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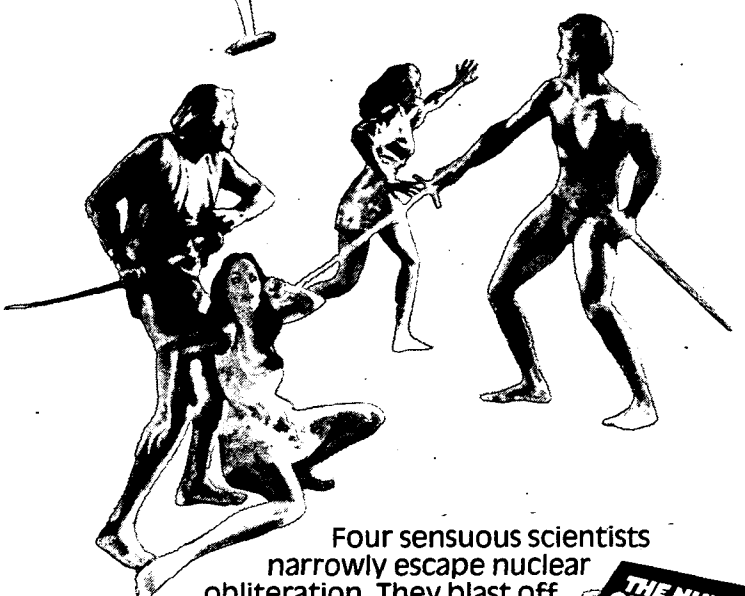

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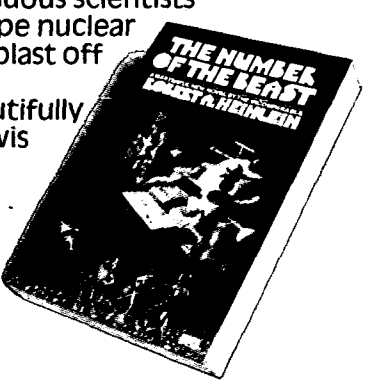

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Zenna Henderson's wonderful series of stories about The People began exactly 28 years ago, with the publication of "Ararat" in the October 1952 issue. Here is the first new People story in more than five years.

Tell Us A Story

BY
ZENNA HENDERSON

"Tell us a story, Nathan." Lucas' voice was hardly more than a whisper at Nathan's elbow in the darkness of the loft. "Tell about the plow again."

"Oh, yes!" Adina's voice came on a long, indrawn breath from the far corner. "And the cradle. The cradle in the tree."

The loft wasn't very big and it was crowded with things waiting for use again when the seasons swung. So there was hardly room on the floor for the quilts laid over heaps of straw that had long ago lost their crinkle and resilience. Lucas and Nathan were side by side, and Adina, behind bundles, was out of sight against the far wall where she had to roll off the bed before she tried to sit up — because of the pitch of the roof.

"Again?" Nathan mock-protested, pleased. "I've already told it a dozen times."

"It's better'n a story," said Adina. "'Cause it's true, isn't it, Nathan?"

"Sometimes I get to thinking and I kinda wonder." Lucas' voice came, hoarsely cautious. He coughed tentatively a couple of times, but it wasn't very winter yet and a couple of times was enough.

"Wonder!" Adina's voice came indignantly, followed by a *whack* as she forgot to roll before sitting up.

"Shhh! Shhhh!" The cabin was so quiet that breathing was too loud, but there was no sound of grown-ups turning to wake, and so the children breathed again.

"Oh," Lucas' voice came a little louder. "They don't ever wake up. They're too tired."

"No matter," Adina's voice snap-

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ped. "You don't believe—"

"I didn't say that!" protested Lucas. "I only wonder sometimes!" There was a scrabble as Lucas sat up and leaned forward in the darkness. "Don't *you?*"

"But it's true, isn't it, Nathan?" Adina's half-whispering voice wanted comfort.

"It's true," said Nathan, "But sometimes I wonder, too—"

"Yeah!" said Lucas. "What if he told Father—"

"I had to go after Kelly Cow." Nathan's voice slid smoothly into the silence, into the well-worn grooves of the story. "Now we know where she goes when she runs away, but last spring I had to hunt for her and got all tore up in the thicket by the river. Course, I know now to go around the thicket instead of through. I found her footprints in the mud on our side of the thicket and followed them through. And Kelly Cow was browsing right along the edge of the field."

Nathan drew a deep breath of mingled pleasure and wonder. "And the plow was plowing—straight as a string, all the length of the field and back again. With no horse pulling! And nobody following! I—I wondered what made it work. I was kinda scared, but I followed it clear down the field, and it just went along with a kind of a crunching, sussing sound coming from it. I don't mean it was making any noise by itself. The sound was just the furrow opening up as the plow cut through. I stood in front of it and watched it come. I was watching it so hard that I mighty near got plowed my own self."

"Ploughed your own self!" Lucas echoed, with a giggle.

"And then the baby cried," said Adina. The rustle of her pleased settling down under her covers filled the little pause.

"Made me jump," said Nathan. "To hear a baby crying out there. I hadn't seen anyone around and I couldn't figure where it was—the baby. I looked and looked along the field and under the trees—not moving much, just looking. I didn't know— But I was looking too low. It was up in a tree! There was a cradle hanging from a limb by a couple of ropes. Just like *Rockaby baby up in a tree top* — and a baby was crying in it. It was clear across the field from me, but I could see its little fists waving while it cried. And then the cradle began to rock."

Adina sang softly, *"When the wind blows, the cradle will rock—"*

"Only there wasn't any wind," said Nathan. "It just started to rock. And not a leaf moving except when the cradle touched it. But the baby kept crying. So—so a lady came out of another tree and went over and got the baby from the cradle, and *then*—and *then* she walked on the ground! She just slid through the air and stopped by the cradle to take the baby out—on her way down to the ground."

"And a father came," Lucas prompted.

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"A father came and threw the baby up in the air and laughed. And the baby laughed, too, waving its hands and kind of bouncing around up there. And it didn't come down! Its father went up and got it. Then he hugged the mother with one arm and carried the baby with the other. They went away through the trees. I waited to be sure they were gone. Then, all at once, a little brown basket came down out of the other tree and went away after them."

Nathan's voice died; then he said. "It was a black walnut tree, and the basket was full of green leaves. That seemed crazy to me until Adina reminded me later."

"For the dye pot," said Adina, complacently, in the dark. "To dye brown."

There was a sudden rustle as Nathan sat up on his pallet. "I just remembered," he said. "The baby's dress was pink—real pink—like—like the little wild roses on the edge of the thicket—when they're only part open."

"Like a rose?" Adina was unbelieving. "Like a rose!" She was wistful. "I wish we could make pretty colors."

"Well," said Nathan, "Kelly Cow was going back toward the river. So I went after her. The plow was still going back and forth and back and forth. A lot of birds would fly up from the furrows at the far end, when it came; then, after the plow turned back, they all settled down again. I watched the plow go down the last row and run off the field and make a kind of curlicue at the end of the field, as if—as if it'd been writing something all over the field and was just finishing it. Then it got up in the air and went off through the trees after the people." Nathan sighed.

"It was a good field. No stumps. No stones. There was a pile of stumps near the thicket. The roots were all long and spidery looking. None of them were cut off. They reminded me a little bit of a bunch of radishes pulled up and dropped in a pile.

"And that's all." There was an empty feeling after Nathan's voice stopped. There had to be more—

"But you've gone back a lot of times," said Lucas. "Kelly Cow keeps running away."

"Yes," said Nathan. "They have a real good stand of corn. That's all I ever see any more—the corn."

The silence lengthened and lengthened until it became slow breathing sleep.

Nathan was hunting for Kelly Cow again. He shivered and groped in the ankle-deep snow for a more secure footing. No matter what they did to keep her home, short of locking her in the barn, she always managed to get away. And always headed for the farm beyond the thicket. Nathan started on, miserable with the cold and wanting supper. He bumped carelessly against a snow-laden bush, which immediately flipped and slapped him with a handful of snow. He sank down to sit on the

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ground—and sat where a hollow under the snow sprawled him sideways. He lay there, twisted, with difficult tears forcing themselves out of his eyes. Then he scrambled to his knees, alert and startled.

Someone was standing, half-concealed, behind a screen of bare bushes.

"Oh, hello," said Nathan, backhanding his eyes. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Hello." The voice was soft and friendly—with just a hint of accent about it. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said Nathan, getting slowly to his feet, stiff with cold and shyness. "I'm just cold. That Kelly Cow—"

"Here." The figure moved into plain sight. "Here is warmness." Ungloved girl hands offered something to Nathan.

Automatically, he took the thing, his hand sagging a bit under the slight weight, and warmness flowed from it into his hands and began to creep slowly into his coldness.

"What is it?" he asked, looking more closely at the dark, irregular chunk in his hands.

"It is warmness. We use it in the time of cold when we do not want to shield. It is small. It will last small."

"Thank you," said Nathan. "It feels good." He pressed the warmness against his cold cheek and felt the hurting warmth of returning circulation in his ear. "I'm going to die of that Kelly Cow yet," he said, wishing he had a warmness for each cold foot. "I can't figure why she keeps coming over here anyway."

The person's face turned pink. "I think that perhaps we—we call her to our loneliness. And we pet her. And give her things to eat, though—" thoughtfully— "she didn't care for the rabbit bone."

"Cows don't eat meat," Nathan scoffed. "Well, I hafta be getting home or the dark will catch me." He looked around for the cow.

"She is over on the other side of the small trees," said the person. "Why do you always come for Kelly Cow? If she doesn't want to stay, why do you want her to?"

Nathan was startled. "Don't you know anything about cows?" he asked. "Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Eliada," said the girl. "But what about Kelly Cow?"

"We need her milk," said Nathan patiently. How could anyone not know about *cows?* "We drink her milk and use it for bread-and-milk and mush, and, if she's giving enough, we can make butter and cheese—a little, anyway. Sometimes it's the only food we have, between crops."

"Oh," Eliada was thoughtful. Then she smiled. "Like our multibeasts. I had a multiyouny, but—" Her face tightened and she struggled with something in her throat until she could add: "We had to leave it, when we left. It liked to have its ears rubbed. It was Mahco." Her eyes were very bright and her voice broke.

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Nathan was embarrassed before her emotion. "Yeah, I know," he said, tossing the warmness from one hand to the other. "I had to leave my dog. He was too old to travel all that way afoot and Papa said he couldn't ride. Jimmy said he'd take good care of him." His face stilled for a breath-length. "I had to leave Jimmy, too—my best friend."

"Now," said Eliada, her face serene again. "Here is Kelly Cow. May I taste the—the milk of Kelly Cow?"

Nathan had jumped at the nudge of Kelly Cow's nose against his back. He whirled and gathered up the raggedy old rope end as though the cow were going to take off at a dead run. Then he dropped it and half grinned at Eliada. "But how?" he asked. "What'll you drink out of?"

"Oh, yes, a container." Eliada looked around as though containers grew magically on trees; then she squatted down and, drawing a double handfull of snow toward her, molded it rapidly into a bowl shape. A piece of the rim cumbled out as the two looked at it. With an embarrassed glance at Nathan, Eliada cupped her hands around the container and closed her eyes in concentration. The bowl melted immediately into a puddle of clear water that began to dull into ice.

"Oops!" she said, smiling up at Nathan. "That was for metal."

She quickly formed another bowl from the snow. Again she cupped it. Again she concentrated. And the surface of the bowl flowed upon itself, then solidified to ice. Eliada grasped it with both hands and lifted firmly. The bowl came away with an audible snap at its base.

"There. A container. If milk isn't too warm and we don't use a slow time."

Nathan closed his mouth and shrugged. He didn't know everything about everything. And the two of them waded through the loose snow to Kelly Cow, who, perversely, was wandering slowly homeward again.

"Here," said Nathan, holding out the warmness. "I need both hands."

"Do you have a place in your clothes to put it?" she asked.

"Sure, I've got a pocket," said Nathan, half smiling at her odd way of talking. You meet all kinds of strangers in a wilderness. He slipped the small chunk into his shirt pocket. "Now give me that snow thing."

Squatting awkwardly without a milking stool, he managed to half fill the snow cup. He handed it to Eliada. She took it and lifted it to her mouth. She hesitated and smiled at him apologetically. "There have been so many things lately that—" she shuddered a little, then tilted her head and the bowl and drank.

"It's good!" Eliada lowered the cup, a little mustache of milk foam at the corners of her mouth.

"Kelly Cow gives good milk," said Nathan. "But I gotta go now. It's settin' in to snow all night." He wound the short, frazzled end of the old rope

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around his hand, but something about Eliada kept him from starting. She was standing, staring down at the snow cup. Without moving her head, her eyes lifted to Nathan. The tip of her tongue wiped away the milk smudges on her lip. "We are hungry," she said. "We are very hungry."

"Hungry?" Nathan asked. "How come? You had a good corn crop—"

"If that is all you have to eat, it does not last until the year turns." Eliada's finger tightened on the bowl. "We are trying different barks now. But they are bitter!" Her voice broke. "And we are hungry!"

"Well, my golly! I don't have—" Nathan fumbled for words.

"You have Kelly Cow." Eliada's eyes were shut as she forced the words out. "And it has milk—"

"Yeah, but we have to eat, too!" Nathan defended.

Eliada drooped from crown to snow, the bowl slipping from her hand and plopping wetly at her feet.

"All right! All right!" he said gruffly. "I'll give you some of the milk." Visions of milkless cornmeal mush streaked through his mind and, even milkless, made him hungry. "I guess a cup of cold—milk—"

Eliada was suddenly close to him, pinching a fold of his coat between her finger and thumb.

"You know, too!" She cried softly. "Who feeds the hungry feeds two."

Nathan twisted away and thumped the heel of his hand against Kelly Cow's shoulder. "What you going to put it in?" he asked. "But not all of it! Papa would tan my hide if I brought Kelly Cow home dry!"

"I will go," said Eliada eagerly. "I will go quickly. We have a container." She whirled and fled over the snow, swiftly, lightly, as though the snow was no hindrance to her feet—as though she flew through the deepening snowfall.

She was back, panting, with her container, its odd misshapenness bending her wrists downward.

Nathan looked at it dubiously. "Where'd you get that thing?" he asked. "If it's that heavy empty, how you going to carry it full?"

"I will carry it," she said, her eyes shining. "It is made of—of what was left after—after—" She hugged it to her with both arms. "It is not beautiful. We have not had much time for beauty yet. Besides, there is no metaller among us now. But it is loved. It is from Home."

"Yeah—well—home," said Nathan, reaching for the container. "Mama has her little trunk. We couldn't bring much, either."

He took the container and squatted again by Kelly Cow and began milking. White foam backed away from the far edge and the stream of milk rang musically against the metal.

"Almost a song," said Eliada. "Can you hear it?" She paced her words to the rhythm of the milking. "Praise—praise—food—food—Sing—sing. Oh,

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let us sing our praise for food!"

Her words caught Nathan's fancy and he tried it. "Praise—God—from—whom—all—blessing—" Then he slipped sideways and almost spilled the milk, righted himself and ended up triumphantly, though the rhythm was a little muffled because of the level of the milk rising. "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!" Then he looked a little dismayed at the amount of the milk in the container—and a little dubiously at depleted Kelly Cow. Eliada caught his uncertainty.

"You have given us too much?" she asked.

"Naw, guess not. Can't put it back anyway. If I'm gonna catch it, another cup or two won't change things. Think you can carry it?" He lifted the awkward, slopping basin up to her hands.

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes were shining. "I will make it less heavy. This good gift of food you have given us. But the best gift is—well, I knew it was the same everywhere, but to hear you sing to Them—" softly she echoed, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost—Though you named them other—that is the best gift you have given. Thank you."

Nathan wound the tattered rope around his hand again, shy to hear her speak so freely of such things. "You're welcome. Now you got something to go on your mush."

"Mush?"

"Well, porridge."

"Porridge?"

"Gollee! You *must* be foreigners! Look, have you got any corn left?"

"Yes." She shuddered a little. "But, now, our stomachs—"

"Well, grind some up to make meal, but not as fine as flour—here—" he said to her not-knowing look—"about this coarse." He held out his hand and the grainy snow began settling on his old green mitten. "See? About that big. And cook it with water and a little salt." He watched her comprehending nods at each step of the directions. "Stir it good or you'll get lumps. Then put it in a dish and pour milk on it. If you've got any sweetening, put that on, too." His stomach suddenly spoke to him out of its hunger.

"Gotta go." He dragged at Kelly Cow. "I'm late now, and the snow—"

He looked back from the far side of the thicket and saw only the flick of Eliada's skirt disappearing among the trees. He became conscious of the warmness against his chest and caught his breath to call out. But, eying the distance, he turned and trudged off with Kelly Cow, the warmness in his cold, free hand.

"You're late." Mama was brisk about the table and didn't look at Nathan. "Strain the milk into the crock. Supper's almost ready. Adina, you help him."

Adina stretched the strainer cloth tight across the top of the heavy crock and watched carefully as Nathan

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poured the milk, to make sure that the cheese cloth didn't slip.

"Is that all?" she asked, her clear voice loud in the evening silence.

"Shush!" Nathan elbowed her sharply.

"Mama!" came her outraged squawk.

"Nathan." Papa's voice was heavy with weariness.

"Yes, sir," said Nathan.

"Is something wrong with the milk tonight?"

"No, sir," said Nathan. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Is so!" said Adina.

"Is not!" retorted Nathan. "There's nothing *wrong* with the milk. There just isn't as much as usual."

"Oh, dear!" Mama came over to see. "You didn't throw rocks at her, again and scare her so that—"

"Rocks scare Kelly Cow—ha!" Adina said pertly, then wilted at Papa's glance.

"Wolves might!" Lucas' eyes were big. "Was it wolves. Nathan?"

"No," said Nathan, shortly. "I gave some of the milk away."

"Give it away? Who on earth could you meet way out here—?" Mama was anxious to know. Who out here in all this loneliness—?

"The people on the place where Kelly Cow always goes. You know, the other side of the thicket. That old man that won't ever talk—only this was a girl from there. We talked." Nathan was getting more and more uncomfortable. "She said they were hungry."

"This was a good year," said Papa slowly.

"But I guess they had only corn —and maybe rabbits. She said they were trying different barks to find something they could eat."

"Bark?" cried Lucas. "Like the deer do?"

"They must be very slack, not to have laid in provisions for the winter," said Papa.

"I don't know," said Nathan, holding the snow bowl tightly in his mind. "Only she tasted the milk and told me they were hungry. I didn't mean to milk so much for them, but—"

"Well," Papa said ponderously. "No matter, for one time. But remember, family must come first."

"Yes, sir," said Nathan. He had a sudden notion. "She—she gave me something—" He reached into his pocket for the warmness and, with a pang, held it out to Papa on the palm of his hand.

"A rock," said Papa, not taking it. "Not much good for supper. Maybe that's why she gave it to you."

Nathan smiled and put the warmness back into his pocket. "Yes, sir," he said, and the room swept back happily into supper activity. Papa was in a good mood.

"*We* called them other?" Adina was shocked. "How could they be anything but Father - Son - and - Holy - Ghost?

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Maybe they're bad people!"

"Adina!" Nathan's voice came sternly through the dark of the loft. "If you don't shut up, I won't *ever* tell you about the baby again"

A rustling plop signified Adina's lying down again.

"People don't all talk the same language. All the languages have a different name for God."

"But," Adina was shaken, "I thought God was always God!"

"He is!" said Nathan. "But—"

"If you keep fighting about God," said Lucas, "you won't never get to finish what happened."

Silence came in the loft. Then there was a sound of turning on the rustling, unsoft pallets. Nathan's voice came again.

"Then I told her how to make cornmeal mush—"

"Mush! She didn't even know that!" Adina was horrified.

"No," said Nathan shortly, resenting the criticism. "They're foreigners. So I told her how and she went away. I forgot to give her back the warmness, and that's why we've still got it."

"It isn't very warm now," said Lucas, coughing as he squeezed it in his hands. "Bet Adina wore it out before I ever got it."

"Did not," said Adina, too tired to get mad.

"Eliada said it wouldn't stay warm very long. It's little." Silence grew again in the loft and became very drowsy. Nathan's voice came sleepily.

"She said she'd make that bowl thing less heavy to carry it home." Silence and heavy breathing were his only answer. Then, sharply awake, Nathan's voice came again. "But she didn't leave any tracks! Not even in the snow!"

The weather closed in that night and snow fell on snow and storm followed storm, seemingly endlessly. During those days in the dusky one room that flickered with firelight, the children worked at the lessons set for them by their mother. Lucas struggled with his alphabet and numbers and his name—and the cough that shook his thin body.

Adina sounded out the stories in Mama's old Primary reading book that had to be read at the table because it was so fragile and so apart—and so precious. Nathan rather guiltily used part of his time to re-read David and Goliath in the Old Testament part of the Bible. He could have read it with his eyes shut, but he read it again, because it belonged to a time and place like this—shut in, sheltered. The shadowy room swirling with warmth and cold as the fire leaped and sank and the drafts billowed the hanging clothes hanging on pegs against the wall.

Finally, he set aside the Bible and the pleasant containment of the old story, and got out the box of carefully hoarded pieces of newspapers they had salvaged from wherever they happen-

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ed to be found. Some made no sense at all when you tried to read what there was of them, but some were exciting and engrossing—and seldom complete. But something to read, words to learn.

It was a warm, contained sort of time, with no world except the house. It's outside corners shrieked in the wind, but its inside corners were sheltering, though chilly. Outside was lightless tumult. Inside at one or two places beneath the roof, there was the companionable sound of dripping water—the hurried *plik, plik, plik* intermingling with the deeper, slower *plunk-a, plunk-a.*

Papa rocked in his big chair that he had made after they got here. He looked long into the fire or at the dark ceiling, thinking whatever thoughts came to a wilderness farmer in off season. Or he worked on the horses' harness. Or sat with the Bible on his knees, drowsing, his chair slowing—rousing, his chair picking up tempo.

Mama never lacked for something to do, but even she arrived at a time when she could sit for long, resting moments, her current task on her lap, with no urgency about it.

There were no days or nights. Time was kept only by the checking of the stock in the small barn behind the house, and the coming of bedtime and rising and the diminishing of the woodpile beside the fireplace.

At some point in this timelessness, Nathan glanced up from his reading—*bride wore white mousseline de sois*—as if someone had called him. No one in the room was even looking at him, and so he bent to his work again. Again the call came, sharply, urgently, with not a sound—not a word. He got up uneasily and went to the fireplace. The woodbox had been refilled recently. The fire was about its secret munching and crunching of the old wood from clearing the land. Even the *plunk-a, plunk-a,* was the same.

"I think I'll go check the stock," he said, trying to sound like Papa.

"Little early for that," said Papa, glancing up.

"I need to stretch my legs," Nathan said, reaching for his coat. He lighted the small lantern with a splinter blazed from the fire, and turned to the door. Lucas was ahead of him, coughing in his hurry, hacking at the frozen lumps at the bottom of the door with the crowbar.

"Don't let go of the rope," said Mama, anxious because of the wilderness out of doors.

The call caught Nathan as he opened the door, and he stumbled a little on the uneven floor. What was it? What was urging him? Not *out,* he realized, just—just *listen.* No—he wrestled with the problem as he wrestled with closing the door. No—not *listen.* It was *there's need!* Who called?

He got the door shut and clung firmly to the rope stretched from house to barn, while he caught his balance against the howling fury of the wind and the knifing of the snow against the

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exposed parts of his face. He hugged the lantern to him, under his coat, to keep it from being blown out—and away.

It seemed like a hundred miles and a hundred years before he half stumbled, half fell into the barn. The animals swung drowsy faces to look at him, their eyes catching, with unexpected brightness, what little light came from the lantern that flared smokily, then settled to its small glow.

The snow had housed the animals completely against the wind. Their own bodies had warmed the place and melted some of the snow that had sifted in at the top of the rough walls. The moisture had run down the logs to freeze smoothly again near the floor. The water trough was partly frozen, and Nathan hacked at the thin ice with his heel.

There's need! It was words now, that came so shocking loud inside his head that Nathan whirled, his elbow going up defensively. No one was in the half-light of the chilly stillness except the huddled animals who rippled across with small movement. Then they swung about to stare at the wall opposite the door. Nathan went to the wall and rested his hands against it, his eyes fanning a scared look over the rough logs.

There's need! There's need! The soundless words sobbed into the silence.

"El—" His voice wouldn't work. He tried again. "Eliada?"

Nathan! Nathan! Relief cried in every syllable.

"You can't get in that way," Nathan called foolishly to the rough wall and the quiet stock. "The door is around two corners from you."

The animals blinked their eyes and came apart from their concerted staring, and swung slowly away from each other, unpatterned. There was a thud on the door, and Nathan moved to it quickly, pushing out against the frantic pushing in, and Eliada fell into the barn.

"Nathan! Nathan!" she cried from the floor, reaching blindly.

Nathan knelt and reached a hand to help her up. His fingertips rapped and his fingers bent and slid away with no touch of Eliada.

"Oh!" She drew a sobbing breath. "I'm shielding." Then she reached out for Nathan's hand and clung. "Oh, Nathan," she cried as he pulled her, shivering, to her feet. She sagged and almost fell before he caught and held her. "We're dying! There is nothing to eat! Not anything! And no small creatures in the forest because of the— the falling whiteness."

"Snow," said Nathan, wondering that his face was slowly warming to a tingle and that water on the walls was sliding liquidly down to the floor.

"You don't have a coat." he said blankly.

"A—a coat?" Eliada sank down on a hump of hay near the wall. "Oh—oh.

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No—no coat. I can warm without, and my— Oh, but, Nathan! You don't understand? We are being Called. We are—dying of—of hunger! There is *nothing*. Oh, Nathan, to have nothing! To put out your hand and there is nothing to fill it. To swallow nothing and hurt and hurt—!" She curled herself down on the hay and cried.

Nathan looked around at the dim animals, their eyes taking turns at catching the light as their jaws crunched, wondering what on earth he could do.

"Come on," he said. "Come to the house. We'll tell Mama and Papa. How — how many people? I mean, how big a family do you have?" He helped Eliada up from the hay.

"We are only six—now," she said, a great sorrow filling the room. "All the others—all those I could see from my slip—went in flicks of brightness—back to the Presence. But what was left—we finally found each other, and we are six. But soon our bodies will not be able to contain us—unless we can find food—" She sagged down against his holding hand.

"We can share," said Nathan. "But for how long—" He used two hands trying to hold the weight.

"Only until the—the snow goes," she said. "We found roots to eat and food even inside the hard round black things under the trees—"

"Walnuts," said Nathan. "Why didn't you gather them last fall? Not much meat for a lot of work but—"

"But we didn't know!" cried Eliada. "We don't know this new world! We came so far—And now to die—" Her eyes closed and she floated slowly down—not quite to the floor—and hovered there in a small unconscious heap. Nathan grabbed clumsily for her, rapping his knuckles against her shoulder. And she slid slowly—inches above the barn floor—away from him to bump softly against Kelly Cow's winter shaggy legs. Kelly Cow backed up a step, and went on chewing her cud, her eyes large and luminous in the half dark.

Nathan snatched the lantern and turned to the door. He felt cold flooding back all round him. Then he turned from the door and reached for Eliada. Then turned back—panic squeezed his breath. He crouched on the floor beside Eliada and closed his eyes as tightly as he could, fighting against running and screaming and—

A sudden blast of cold air on his back whirled him around. Papa was leaning back against the push of the door, getting it shut.

"What's keeping you?" Papa asked, thumping snow off his boots. "Your mother—" He broke off as Nathan's shift to hide Eliada pushed her out between them. She straightened out as she floated, and her hair spilled darkly bright, longer than the distance to the floor.

"It's—it's Eliada," Nathan said, his eyes intent on Papa's face as he gathered the inert body into his arms.

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"The girl I gave the milk to. She came for help. They're starving in this storm."

"She'll freeze in this storm if you stay out here," said Papa. "Give her to me."

Nathan stood up, lifting Eliada with him. He looked at his father, his eyes wide with wonder. "She is less heavy—like she said she'd make the milk."

"You're wasting time," said Papa and took Eliada. His arms jerked upward at the lack of expected weight. Nathan caught the limpness of a trailing hand and kept Eliada from leaving Papa's grasp. Papa took a firmer hold, one arm over and one under, turning Eliada so her face pressed against his shoulder.

"The door," he said, and Nathan slipped around him and opened the door to the blast of the storm.

After endlessly struggling with wind and the stinging slap of driven snow, Nathan, clinging to the stretched rope with one hand and the darkened lantern with the other, stopped to gasp for breath. Papa stopped close behind him, pushing Eliada against him to provide some small, brief shelter. Nathan felt a movement against his back and felt Eliada say something. He turned and groped to touch her to—to warn her?

"Cold," said Eliada, stirring. "Cold."

And the howl and shove of the storm slowly muted. The sting and slap of the snow-laden wind swirled, hesitated, and was stilled. And slowly, slowly warmth wrapped them about. Slowly? It was all in the space of a started in-breathing and an astonished out-breathing.

Nathan clung to the rope, trying to see Papa. It was too dark. Papa muttered something and pushed Eliada against Nathan's back. Nathan stumbled on toward the house, his troubled face seeking for the wind and snow that should be punishing him.

Then he saw the lighted doorway ahead, with Mama anxiously peering out, a quilt clutched around her for warmth. As they moved into the lightened darkness of the doorway, Nathan glanced up. He saw the snow driving, swirling down, but it never reached them. It curved and slid away as if—as if there were something between them and the night. Then Eliada stirred again, lifting her pale face to look up. And, with a doubled roar and chill, the storm smote them again.

Then they were in and the door was shut and the unbelievable warmth and comfort of the house enveloped them.

"It is so good." Eliada looked up from the bowl of bread-and-milk—hard crusts of bread broken into a bowl of milk—hot milk, this time, because of the cold.

"Best not eat anything else now," said Mama, who glowed with having a guest to feed. "What with being hungry so long—"

"Else?" said Eliada, her eyes widen-

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ing. "More to eat than this?" She lifted a white spoonful. "At the same eating? In *this* world?"

"Eggs," said Mama, her worried look sliding to Papa. "From our hens. Before the storm began, they were laying pretty good—"

"Eggs?" Eliada slid back into some place in her head that she seemed to have to go to often, for some reason.

"Oh, eggs!" Her eyes shone again. "The bird ones were so small. But they all went away when the cold came. Did your birds not go away?" She asked Lucas who had followed her like a clumsy, quilt-wrapped shadow ever since she had come in. He leaned on the table opposite her, his eyes feeding even more hungrily than her mouth did.

"Yes," he said hoarsely, "The birds went away, but our hens—" He wrapped his arms tightly around himself and coughed until he gagged. He sat swiping at the cough-driven tears with the worn quilt over his arm, and sniffed and shook with the cold that shook anyone if they left the reach of the fireplace. Everyone except Eliada.

Eliada looked around at the rest of the family, her cheeks becoming faintly pink. "You are all cold," she said. "I'm sorry. I forgot you are not my People." She broke off, then turned to Papa. "I am not strong enough or skilled enough in that Persuasion, since it is not my gift, but if you have a metal—something— I can make it give heat for you for a while."

Papa looked at her, his eyes too deep in shadows to show any glint. Nathan rushed into the moment of silence. "Like the little one she gave me. You know, you thought it was a rock, but it was metal and it was warm."

Before Papa could say anything, Lucas darted for the door, shedding his outer layer as he went, and got there at the same moment as Adina, and both snatched up the heavy metal crowbar that, at this season, was the tool for breaking the ice from the door when the drifts froze too hard to kick aside. It was a short, stout metal bar, bent into a hook at one end and flattened to a stubbly blade at the other.

Together, the two children wrestled the bar back to Eliada.

"Yes," she smiled. "Put it with the fire."

"Aw, heating it in the fire's no good. The pots get cold right away when you take them off." Lucas was disappointed.

"Do what she says," said Adina, tugging at the bar. "Give it to me and I'll—"

The two, tugging against each other, managed to plop the bar into the front of the ashes. It raised a small grimy snow from the feathery ashes.

"It is better in front," said Eliada. "In the fire, the warmness would go up the opening to outside. It is odd—" Her cheeks pinked-up and she moved to the fireplace.

Eliada knelt in front of the bar, little fluffs of ashes stirring around her

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as she knelt. She made a quick sign with one hand; then she reached a finger to touch the end of the bar. She glanced back at the absorbed faces. "I'm not practiced," she said. "I must touch first."

There was a brief silence during which the sound of the wind filled the house as completely as though it were empty of life. Then Eliada lifted her finger from the bar and sat back sideways, but still looking at the bar. She lifted herself a little to pull her dress free from where it had twisted under her, and sat again.

Slowly, wonderfully, warmth began. And flowed into the chilly room like a warming stream, loosening muscles that were unconsciously tightened against the cold, making cheeks and ears start to tingle.

Eliada came to her feet. "I cannot make it more than warm," she said. "Some can make it glow dull red, but—"

"Gollee!" Adina's eyes were wide. "That's magic! Where did you learn that?"

"At Home," said Eliada. She seemed suddenly unsteady and held tightly to the edge of the table with white fingertips. "Before our Crossing. Before we fell here—" Then she straightened and managed a smile. "But we learn here also," she said. "We have learned to make mush from corn—"

"Mush!" Lucas' scorn was large again. "How to make mush!"

"It fed us," said Eliada. "And the bar—it warms you. Why is one more wonderful than the other?"

Nathan shook his head. Maybe so. But to compare something like making mush to this miracle—and yet—he shook his head again.

"Feeding," said Papa suddenly. "Your people. They're still hungry?"

"Yes," Eliada's face sobered. "They were so hungered that I was the only one who could come. The others are in protective sleep until I come with food. And, if I could not find food, or if I should be Called while I am away, they will sleep until their Calling."

"Oh," said Mama, clutching the side of her apron. "We'll have to—" Her eyes went to Papa, but he was going back to his rocking chair, hitching it to an angle to put the fireplace out of his sight. "Well," said Mama, hesitantly. Then she smiled and turned to Eliada, her face alight with the pleasure of being able to share.

"And these?" Eliada touched one finger to the rosy brown curve of an egg.

"Eggs," said Lucas, torn between scorn for her ignorance and his fascination with her.

"So big!" said Eliada. "The bird one, so small! So small to hold all that feathers and singing! Do your—do your hens sing, too?"

"They might call it singing," said Nathan smiling. "On warm summer days, all lazy in the sun—" Tears bit

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suddenly at the back of his eyes at the remote memory.

"We can let you have these," said Mother. "When they are gone, there will be others." She gathered them, with a practiced outspreading of her fingers, lifting them from the bowl. "But how—they'll break—"

"I can carry them," assured Eliada. And Mama, hesitating for a moment, put them down on the table. One egg began a slow, flopping roll to the edge, but Eliada looked at it, and it reversed itself and hid itself in the middle of the small cluster.

"And to eat them?" Eliada's cheeks were less white now, and her eyes were losing their hooded look of suffering.

"If you were hungry enough, raw would do," said Nathan with a grimace. "But, cooked—? You have fire to cook with?"

"We have to cook with," said Eliada, her eyes going to the bar on the hearth.

"But how can you carry all this by yourself?" Nathan shivered. Even Eliada's magic didn't operate very well on the far side of the room. Eliada's eyes were on the little heaps of food, as if her eyes were still hungry. Then her smile, fed and comfortable, said, "I can carry it. We—we can carry much. I will show you."

She folded the rough piece of canvas Nathan had found up in the loft up around the food; then, stepping back a little from the table, she looked at the lumpy package. It suddenly quivered through, then lifted a little from the table and slid toward Eliada. She took hold of one loose corner of the canvas and moved over to the door. The bundle followed her, obedient to the tug of her fingertips.

Eliada smiled, her eyes touching each person, like a warm hand. "And, see? One whole hand left to carry the container of milk!" The lard can, with its tightly fitted cover, lifted up at a gesture of her hand and hung itself on her fingers.

"How are you going to get home?" asked Adina, anxiously. "It's so cold and dark."

"I can always find home," said Eliada, smiling at her. "And I can shield against the storm." Her glance gathered them together again, her eyes glowing in the twilight of the room. "Truly the Presence, the Name and the Power are here with you. From your little, you have given us abundance. Even here—so far from Home. So the Old Ones assured us, but—but—" Nathan felt her spasm of grief and sorrow, and then she smiled a little. "It is so much easier to doubt than to believe."

She glanced at the fireplace where the heavy length of the crowbar sent out almost visible waves of warmth. "It will cool," she reminded. "A day or two days. Or, if gratitude counts, maybe many more days." She made a farewell sign with her hand. "Dwell comforted in the Presence." And then she was gone, the door stubbing back

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on the chunks of ice and snow that had fallen against the threshhold.

There was a silence, broken only by the vast rush of the wind. Surely not so loudly now that warmth was in the room.

Then Papa moved to the fireplace and kicked thoughtfully at the crowbar. "I'm not sure I want to be warmed by this warmth," he said, his voice rolling deep through the unaccustomed length of his sentence. "It may be of evil. This will take some thinking out."

"Papa," Nathan's voice was urgent. "It can't be evil. She knew Father, Son and Holy Ghost, only she said they called them something else. Other languages—"

"And yet," said Papa. "The Devil can quote Scriptures for his purposes. This will take some thinking out." And he sat again in his chair, the Bible on his lap again, his eyes deep-shadowed by his heavy brows, and stared into the almost visible warmth of the bar.

"Too easy," he muttered. "By the sweat of thy brow—"

The storm cleared from the skies and the crackling cold came. It lay heavily on the land, so heavily that it crushed every vestige of color from everything so that, in a black and white world, Nathan's red cap was like a sudden shout.

He had walked over the crispness of the frozen world to the thicket where even Kelly Cow had sense enough not to venture this day. He stood on the other side of the thicket, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched against the cold, and looked across the smooth, stumpless, sunless field beyond, wondering how those people were doing.

Then he heard a clear call and the sound of laughter, and shrank back, startled, into the shadow of the thicket.

A streak of color shot across the smoothness of the field, dark hair streaming free, bright blue clothes an exclamation point against the white. Eliada? It seemed of a size.

Then came the others, staying in a little cluster, a small child piggy-back on one of them. Brightly, laughingly, they followed Eliada, skimming the snow as if—

Nathan clutched a limb for something solid to hang on to. Eliada swung by him, close enough for him almost to touch. And was gone before he could blink. But she couldn't have! No one—Then the cluster swirled past, the laughing child clinging to the hair of the laughing man. Then they were all at the far side of the field again.

"They can't!" Nathan whispered indignantly. "They can't skate with no skates on. And without moving their feet! They can't."

And a thin, sweet memory stabbed back to him from Back Home. A red sled, and a very high hill, and the delightful terror of letting go at the top—and collecting your breath again at the bottom. But you had to have a

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hill—and a sled—

He looked across the flatness of the field. The people had stopped now and were clustered together. Then one slid away from the others, and Eliada was skimming the snow, back across the field. Toward him? He shrank farther back in the thicket, suddenly afraid.

Eliada came slower and slower and stopped. "Nathan?" she called. "Nathan?"

Nathan crunched snow to face her. "Yeah," he said.

"Oh, Nathan!" Eliada took his two hands and pulled him out of the thicket. "I sensed you as we went by! But I wasn't sure, so I came— Isn't it a beautiful day?" She whirled lightly around Nathan, making him feel heavy-footed and as awkward as a hub. Then she shot away from him—not even *touching*—but, yes, because, as she turned, a skiff of snow sprayed briefly—and again when she returned to him and stopped, laughing and panting.

"You're all right now?" he asked. "You have plenty to eat?" Her glowing face told him how unnecessary was the question.

"Oh, Nathan!" she laughed. "It would be all funny, if we hadn't so nearly been Called because of hunger."

"What happened?" Nathan hunched and shivered. Standing still, the cold flowed into you fast.

"Oh, I forgot," said Eliada. "Here, I'll extend."

And a motion came between Nathan and the cold, a motion that circled him completely and closed him into warmth with Eliada.

"How do you do that!" he asked, unhappily.

Eliada's face sobered. "Does it offend you?" she asked. "It is more comfortable, merely."

Nathan rubbed his nose, which had started to tingle.

"What was funny?" he asked.

Eliada's face brightened. "After we ate your food—and, Nathan, nothing, not even the festival foods we had to leave behind on The Home, ever tasted so good. We cried for its goodness as we ate. And laughed because we cried. But the food didn't last very long. And we thought to sleep again to our Calling rather than to take food again from your family. But one morning I received a directive to go dig in the little hill behind the house. Such a silly thing to do! But a directive! So two of us went. I could hardly lift the digging thing, but Roth was stronger. He has no sight because of the Crossing, but he is strong. So we tried to dig—and blocks fell away and there was a door! and we opened it—and food! Food!"

"The root cellar," said Nathan. "The people before you put the food by for the winter. How come they didn't tell you before they left?"

Eliada's face saddened. "There was only one, and he did not leave. He was Called the day we arrived. One of the Life slips shattered and his body was too broken to hold him more. So he

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was Called. With my brother. It was his slip that shattered." She tightened her lips and a tear slid from the corner of one eye. "How joyfully he went Otherside, but how lonely for us who are still this side."

"Your brother—" Nathan swallowed with an effort that didn't get rid of the heavy lump choking him. "My—my—" He watched his toe kick against a skeletal bush until he could stop his lips.

"It's too bad you didn't get the directive before you got that hungry," he said, still not looking at her. "Whatever a directive is."

"A directive?" asked Eliada. "But surely—I mean, maybe you have another name for it. For when the Power says to you, *Do*, unless you are too far separated from the Presence, you *do* for that is what must be done, when it must be done."

"No," said Nathan. "At least, I don't know. Still think it could have passed the word—"

"We sometimes wonder," said Eliada, "But we never question. If the directive had come sooner, I would not have gone to you. And I would not now be saying, how can I help loose you from the burden you bear of sorrow and—and evil, Nathan? Evil?"

Nathan turned his face away, biting his lip to hold his face straight. Eliada moved to where she could see his face again. "And evil? Oh, Nathan!"

"My father killed my brother!" Nathan's voice grated his throat with its suppressed intensity. "I hate him!"

"Killed?" Eliada touched Nathan's arm. "You mean, sent him ahead of his time, back into the Presence? Oh, surely not! Not really so?"

"The same as—" Nathan raked a violent fist across his face because of the wetness.

"But—but his own son—" Eliada's face was troubled. "Oh, Nathan, tell me!"

"My father." The words were bitter in his tight mouth. "He decided it was an evil power you used to heat up the crowbar. He raked it out of the fireplace with a stick and shoved it out the door into the dark. He said you had no right to warm us better than he could, and that at least we know why wood makes us warm. Lucas—" his voice died and he gulped. "Lucas cried and grabbed my father's arm, trying to keep him from throwing the warm away, but my father back-handed him clear across the room and did anyway. And Lucas coughed and coughed and wouldn't put the quilt around him again. He sort of settled down, only crying and coughing and shivering, and he wouldn't go over by the fire.

"Then all at once he had the door open and was out in all that wind and storm, trying to find the crowbar in the puddle of water it had melted in the snow. By the time we got him back inside, he was sopping wet, with ice sliding out of his hair when I lifted him.

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"And he died. He only lasted a day. My father killed him."

And Nathan cried into the crook of his elbow and into the vast warm comfortingness that flowed from Eliada.

"Nathan," Eliada said finally. "We cannot know if Lucas was truly Called or if he was sent ahead, but you must not hate. It is an evil you must not take for a burden. It will eat your heart and cloud your mind and, worst of all, it will separate you from the Presence."

"But Lucas is dead." Nathan's voice was dull.

"He is back in the Presence," said Eliada. "He is healed of the body that was so frail and so often with pain."

Nathan shook his heavy hanging head. "Words—all kinds of words. But Lucas is dead and my father killed him."

He surged away from Eliada and felt a sudden tightness against his forehead. It released suddenly, flooding him with the crisp, cold air. He blinked at the sun as he ran clumsily. The sun? The sun was still shining?

Spring came slowly. Then, one day, it seemed as if every drop of water tied up in every snowflake let go all at once. For days the house perched on a rise that was usually hardly noticeable but that held it above the rising waters. Then the waters began to move, coursing down to the river. The river came up to meet the house and nibbled away at the rise, slowly, slowly, with the whole world a-swim.

Then the torrents began. They ripped across the field Nathan and his father had worked so hard to clear, gouging out gullies and wiping out almost every trace of last year's furrows.

Then the barn went, hardly splashing, as it slid into the greedy waters, just after Nathan and his father had led Kelly Cow and the other stock up the hill behind the barn and left them there with three raggedly wet chickens. The rest of the flock was gone.

Water gathered around the house closer and lapped at the bottom course of logs. The whole family watched from the small window and the door—watched the waters quiver and lift towards the house. Once, the sun came out suddenly and they were in the middle of a glittering sea of brightness. They had to squint their eyes against the glory. Then it was gray and miserable again.

Adina's breath was a warm tickle on Nathan's ear. "It's gone, Nathan! It's gone!" And hot tears started down her scalded-looking cheeks.

"What's gone?" Nathan whispered.

"Where," she gulped. "Where we buried Lucas. Under the little tree. The tree's gone. The grave's gone. Lucas is gone!" Nathan held her while she shook with crying. He lifted his head as Mama came heavily across the floor. She sat down on the bed, then lay back, her feet still on the floor. One bent arm covered her eyes and she said, in a tight, small voice. "Lucas is

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gone. And I have to carry this other one to be born and be killed—"

Father turned from the window, but he didn't go to Mama.

"I didn't kill him," he said, his voice tired of making the same words over and over. "I didn't kill him. It was his running to evil that killed him. Before that evil creature—"

"She isn't evil." Nathan's voice was loud and defiant in the room. "She wanted to warm us—"

"With evil," said Father. "With evil."

"Is everything you don't understand evil?" asked Nathan. "Do you know what makes the sun shine? But you let it warm you anyway."

"God—" said Father.

"God," said Nathan. "God made her, too. And taught her how to warm the crowbar."

"The devil," said Father. He turned back to the window, hunched inside the body that suddenly looked too big for him, that skunched down on Father, bending and stooping, trying to fit.

Then suddenly, briefly, the whole cabin lifted a little and settled again. There was a dark wetness along the long cracks of the rough floor.

"Good," said Mama into the startled silence. "Take it all. Take it all." And she turned her face away from all of them.

But the waters had taken all they were to take and they shrank away from every rise, compressing down into all the low places. There was one spot in the front yard that held a puddle of water for a long time, and it glittered like a watching eye until long after everything else had dried up.

Nathan and his father now faced the task of clearing more land to replace that scoured-out, washed-away deeply gullied part of the farm. Everything around shouted and hummed and smelled of spring and new life and abundant blossoming, but Nathan had no part in the singing, springing, upsurge of delight that was on the land. He was a dark, plodding figure, bowed and unresponsive in the sunlight.

The tree shuddered under every blow of Father's ax. The brightness of the sky hurt Nathan's eyes, and his neck ached from looking up at the shaken branches. Every move that he made was awkward and aching because of the tight hampering of the darkness inside him. He squatted down against a bank of earth and pulled his knees up to his chest, trying to ease the endless aching.

A sharp *crack* from the tree snatched his eyes upward. The tree was twisting—turning unnaturally—splitting!

Something in Nathan cried out, rejoicing—*Now he'll die, too! Now he'll die, too!* But even before the thought formed itself in his mind, he was surging forward on his hands and knees, scrambling to get to his feet.

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"Papa!" he yelled. "Papa!"

Papa looked up, dropped his ax and stood for one long, stunned moment before turning to run—to run in exactly the wrong direction. The splintering tree twisted again and seemed to explode. Papa's cry and Nathan's cry were drowned in the crash.

"Papa!" Nathan groped frantically among the branches. "Papa! Papa!"

Then he found Papa's face. And his hands groped to slide under Papa's shoulders. He cried out as he fell forward over Papa's chest. There was nothing under Papa's shoulders! His head and neck and part of his shoulders were pushed out across the bank of the ragged gully. The weight of the splintery heaping of the tree across his legs and body was all that kept him from slithering backwards down into the rock-jumbled gully behind and below him.

"Papa!" Nathan whispered urgently. He touched the quiet face, his hand wincing away, almost immediately, from the intimacy of the touch.

The face twisted to pain, and the eyes opened, unfocusing beyond Nathan's left shoulder. Then the eyes focused with a vast effort.

"Get it off!" The whisper jerked with the painful effort. "Get it off!" The eyes rolled shut and the head rolled to press against Nathan's startled hand.

"But, Papa!" The words were so loud they splintered the silence. "But, Papa!" he whispered. Then he turned to the twisted mountain of limbs behind him. He scrambled over and grabbed one piece of the splintered trunk. But it was shredded to another piece that peeled from another piece that rocked the edge of the gully, spilling more dirt and rocks from under Papa's shoulder.

Nathan let go hurriedly and could see even that little movement of release flow jerkily through the whole scrambled length of the trunk. And it pushed two more pebbles from under Papa's shoulders.

Nathan slumped down to his knees and slid sideways, his hands grabbing each other and his arms going up to hide his scared face.

"What can I do? What can I do? Oh, God, help me—!"

He jerked around, lifting himself on his knees. *Nathan! Nathan!* Calling him? Not Mama—not Adina!

"Eliada!" he called. "Eliada! Come help! I need—"

There's need? Eliada's call came clearly to him.

"Yes!" he called. "There's need! Come help! I can't—!"

For a long, tight pause Nathan listened to all the busy small sounds of the world of growth. Then a rustle in the trees just back of the jagged half-stump snatched his attention. The branches shuddered and parted, and an anxious-looking Eliada threw herself over the fallen tree to Nathan.

"Oh, Nathan!" She caught her

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eyes checking Nathan rapidly. "There was a directive—so strong! So strong! You have need?"

"Papa," gulped Nathan. "The tree fell on him. I can't move him—"

"Tree?" Eliada's eyes widened. "The broken one? But your papa—"

"Can you help?" Nathan scrambled back to the branches. "Papa is caught under the tree. I can't lift it. Can you help?"

Eliada crouched beside him. "Let me—let me—" She took a deep breath and sat back on her heels, her hand on Papa's arm, her hair swaying forward over her intent face.

"I cannot lift the tree from him," she said from behind the curtain of her hair. "He would fall to the rocks. I cannot lift him and the tree at one time. It is two different Persuasions—animate and inanimate. If he would not waken—but he would—"

"You gotta help!" cried Nathan. "We can't let him—"

"So you must take from under him the rocks and dirt—" as though Nathan hadn't spoken. "And I will hold him until you have freed him—" She backed away and huddled herself over the edge of the slope down in the gully. "You have digging things?"

"Yes, but—" he turned hopelessly to Papa and then to Eliada.

"He will hurt when he wakens." Eliada sighed without opening her eyes. "While he is not awake —"

Nathan stumbled over to the clutter of tools under the near tree. He brought back the shovel and the crowbar. Sweat streaked his face, and dust streaked the sweat as Nathan labored. He hacked away at the bank under Papa with the bar, scrabbled at it with his bare hands and whacked with the edge of the shovel.

Slowly, slowly, the bank crumbled. And Nathan stubbornly refused to look up at Papa, wondering why he believed Eliada could "hold" Papa, but believing desperately.

He had stopped to drag his muddy sleeve across his face again, when Papa cried out and moved, sending dirt cascading down on Nathan.

"Don't move!" Nathan cried. "Papa, don't move! I'm getting you out. Stay still!"

Desperately, he pried at the rounded rock that stuck out of the bank. With a sudden jolt, the rock came loose—and Nathan barely stumbled out of the way of the smothery cascade of the dissolving bank.

The dust cleared slowly and Nathan looked up. There, above him, pressed still up against the splintered tree, lay Papa. Up there! In the air! With nothing between him and Nathan except—nothing! And Papa's terrified face peered down at Nathan.

Then Papa screamed hoarsely and, with one hand, groped blindly at the emptiness under and around him. Then both hands waved frantically. They found the splintery tree above him and clung to it with desperate strength.

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"I cannot move him," said Eliada past the still circling of her arms. "He is holding so strong. If I move him, the tree will go with him."

"Papa!" yelled Nathan. "Let go! Let go!"

But Papa paid no attention, only fumbled with one foot, trying to find a holding place with it.

"I cannot sleep him," said Eliada, her voice unsteady. "I am not strong enough enough to all at the same time. And, until his hands open—"

Nathan stood, fists clenched at his ribs, staring up at Papa. Then he wet his lips with his tongue. "When I holler," he said, "Let him fall—a little ways. Can you do that?"

"Yes," said Eliada. "When you holler—a little fall—"

"Papa!" yelled Nathan. "The tree's going! You're falling! You're falling!"

And Papa fell about a foot. He screamed once before his eyes rolled and his hands relaxed to let his arms dangle below him.

There was an ominous splinter above him and the tree began to sag. Eliada cried out, "Back, Nathan! Quick!" And Nathan, stumbling backward, caught his feet on the rough ground and fell heavily, feeling the scrunching under his doubled knees. He heard a cry from Eliada and twisted, to see Papa jerking away from the falling tree. For a moment Papa hovered in the dusty air above the uppuff from the broken wood landing. Then, as Nathan watched, Papa drifted over Nathan's head. A something hit Nathan's hand, and his other hand smeared it to a wet, red streak as Papa slanted slowly down to the uneven floor of the gully.

Nathan scrambled on hands and knees over to him. "He's bleeding somewhere," he said, glancing up at Eliada.

And she wasn't there.

Nathan never could remember how he got up out of the gully and to Eliada. She was lying quietly, her face turned to the sky, her eyes closed, her mouth a little open, and blood running darkly down from her forehead where a flying stub of a branch had hit her.

Nathan afterwards remembered that day as something that had no meaning in his ordinary life. And yet, in itself, that day was a whole lifetime that fitted together like a jeweled watch. All those impossibilities fitting so neatly together to make the only possible possiblity.

Eliada was unconscious only briefly. Then she cried out, her hand going to her head. She lifted dizzily on her elbow and peered about in the bright sunlight. "Lytha? 'Chell? Oh, Simon, look again! Did we come this far to be Called?" The desolation in her voice called Nathan from halfway back down the gully back up to her in a hurried scramble.

"I had to go see. It's a big cut on Papa's leg," he said. "I tore his shirt and wrapped it up, but something white—" He reached out a startled

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hand and touched Eliada's forehead. "Oh, Eliada!"

Her wide, blind-looking eyes turned to him, then she surged across the space between them. She clung to him so tightly that he had no breath. "Oh, David, David! I thought you crashed! Oh, David!"

"I'm Nathan," he said, prying her fingers gently loose so she could lie down again. "You're hurt—your head—" He touched it again, his eyes anxious on her face.

Eliada's eyes slowly cleared and focused on Nathan. The patient sorrow that resolutely came back over her face made Nathan want to cry.

"Yes," said Eliada, touching her head, then looking at her fingers. She closed her eyes for a moment, then she sat up, leaned forward and wiped her forehead with the under part of the hem of her skirt. "But it is not bleeding now. Your Papa—"

Weakly, as though from far off, he heard Papa's voice.

"Nathan! You all right? Nathan!"

Nathan turned from Eliada and scrambled down the unsure footing of the slope of the gully.

"Papa! You all right?" and dropped to his knees by him.

"Don't know," said Papa. "Help me up."

And Nathan sagged under the weight of Papa's hands as he pulled himself to a sitting position. Papa got his arm around Nathan's shoulder and the two of them strained to lift him to his feet. They had only started upward when Papa cried out and slid down Nathan to the ground again. Nathan straightened him out, moving the rocks that kept him from lying flat, then he looked up at Eliada who was drifting down the slope.

"What we going to do?" he asked hopelessly. "Papa's hurt."

"I have a need for water," said Eliada. "And perhaps your Papa has, too. Is there water?"

Nathan hurried over to where they had put their water pail and the tools. He lifted the lard bucket that sloshed heavily with water and looked back toward where Papa and Eliada were.

Maybe he ought to go get Mama. Maybe somebody else could help them better. Maybe if he just left—he grinned unhappily. With Mama in the family way? And who else to help? Just to walk off from Papa and Eliada? That was kid thinking. *I can't ever be a kid again!* Nathan swung the pail and hurried back.

"It is good." Eliada's eyes were large and luminous on Nathan. Then she smiled a small smile. "Always you are feeding the hungry and giving the cup of water." The smile faded and the eyes closed. "And always, I receive. It is hard always to receive."

"You saved Papa," said Nathan, uneasily looking up the slope.

"For you to hate—" Eliada's eyes opened again.

"I don't hate him," said Nathan, startled that it was so. "Not any more.

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He is—is Papa." He moved over to look at his father. Papa opened his eyes briefly to dull slits and closed them again as if forever. "Papa?"

"We must move him," said Eliada, wearily, drifting up to her feet, leaning for a moment on some unseen support. "I cannot lift him. I am not now strong enough. But I can make him less heavy for you. Lift him."

Nathan knelt on one knee and slid his hands under Papa, lifting him at knees and shoulders. For a moment, the sheer size of Papa made it awkward; then he had stumbled to his feet and was walking slowly toward the house, leaning back from the less-heavy load. It suddenly seemed as if he were carrying Lucas, for under the whiskered, grown-up face, he could trace in the features—as of Lucas—the other long-ago boy who became Papa. Who maybe was as unhappy and hurting now as Lucas had been—a tenderness welled up inside him and he felt his eyes get wet.

"Na—than! Din—ner!" Nathan's head jerked up at the far, thin cry. "Na—than!" Adina's voice came across the scarred wreckage of the field in the long, familiar calling chant. "Din—ner!"

"It's Adina," said Nathan. "Time to eat. Are you coming? Can you come?"

"Yes," said Eliada. "I can come. If I may hold—" She reached out and took Papa's hand where it drooped down, and Nathan started on, carrying the too-light Papa. Feeling a tug, he looked back to see Eliada, trailing like a limp scarf after him, holding fast to Papa's hand.

Adina came running to meet them.

"Is that Eliada? Oh, Eliada!" Then they got close enough for her to see, and her happy call fell silent and her two hands clasped over her open mouth. Her eyes looked again at Nathan, sagging to a stop under the bulk of Papa. And Papa, white and dead-looking, with blood dripping down over one shoe. And Eliada, a pool of limpness at Nathan's feet. And her eyes filled with frightened tears.

"Oh, Nathan! What's the matter with Papa? And Eliada? There's just us kids, because Mama can't— Oh, Nathan! What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

Papa was lying on the bed, damply clean, his cream-colored night shirt pulled smoothly and decently down to the folded-back quilt covering him to the waist. His eyes were open and wary, watching as Eliada's hair shook itself in a swirly cloud until it was dry and smoothed itself decorously down against her head, only to lift again into exuberant curls and waves.

"Oh, it is good to be clean again," she said. "Pain is twice as much when there is dirt and confusion—and blood!" Her finger touched her head where the flesh had closed itself to a thin, red line.

"You sure get well fast," said

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Adina, engrossed in curling a strand of Eliada's hair around her hand and letting it spring free.

"It was small," said Eliada, smiling at her. Then she went over to the bed and melted down upon herself until she was eye to level eye with Papa, straight across.

"But yours is not small," she said. "Your bone is broken. And there is a—a—the flesh is torn to show the bone. It will be a long for it to get well after it is put right again. Do you have those whose gift is to put right?"

Papa looked at her for a long moment, then he said, "Doctors. None closer than the county seat. Six days' horseback."

"Then—" Eliada's face pinked a little. "Then will you let us help you? My People? We can make your leg more right so it will get well and be straight, but I cannot do it alone. Will you let us?'

"Evil," said Papa, but slowly, not so quickly sure any more.

"Evil," said Eliada, thoughtfully, twisting her hand in her hair. "I am not sure I know this evil you know so well—"

"Badness," said Nathan. "Disobeying God. Sometimes it seems good, but only to lead you astray. Thou shalt not—"

"Oh," said Eliada after searching somewhere inside herself. "Separation. Oh, but we would do nothing to separate anyone from the Presence!" She was astonished. "We want to help you, but not if you feel it would separate—"

Papa looked at Eliada for a sharp, short moment. Then he turned his face away. "No," he said. "Get thee behind me, Satan."

Eliada toiled to her feet wearily, her face drawn and unhappy, one foot caught in her skirt. Adina, with a sharp little cry rushed to hinder by trying to help. Nathan lifted Eliada free of her skirts' tangle and of Adina.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Papa sees so much evil—"

"It's because Lucas is dead," said Mama. "That's why he won't let you help. He was so sure that Lucas died because of—of you, that he can't let you help him now, because, if he gets well— And Lucas is dead."

Eliada's head turned alertly. "Roth is here," she said, moving to the door. "We had hoped—"

The tall man who had skated so happily with the small child on his shoulders—so long, oh, so long ago—moved into sight at the door.

"But you said he was blind," said Nathan.

"Yes," said Eliada. "But he has learned to move freely in many places. And there is Moorma—"

A shy, smiling face peered from behind Roth's right leg. Then dodged away, only to peek again from behind his left leg. Nathan felt a smile crack through his tired face, and looked at Eliada. She was smiling, too, as Moorma disappeared again. Adina's giggle was smothered behind quick hands

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and even Mama's face lightened.

"Moorma is like that," said Eliada. "Smiles come with her always, but she is shy with new people. She sees for Roth, when Roth requires it." She went to the door and put her hand into Roth's reaching hand.

"We will help—when you will accept it," she said. "Take comfort in the Presence." And the three of them were gone.

Adina ran out of the door after them crying, "Goodbye! Goodbye!"

She came back into the cabin with a happy little skip. "They're flying," she said. "I knew they would! And Moorma—Moorma's doing it best—holding onto Roth!"

Nathan straightened his weary back by the bed, which had been pulled to the middle of the room, and looked across it at Mama. Mama, her hand holding the wet, folded cloth on Papa's briefly quiet forehead, looked across it at Nathan. Adina wept quietly in the far corner in her shadowy refuge behind hanging clothes.

"He isn't getting better," said Nathan.

"No," said Mama. "He is getting worse. The poultice isn't doing any good at all. The infection is spreading. And we can't keep the splint straight, the way he tosses—"

Papa jerked away from Mama's hand. "Hell's fires! Hot! Warm warm warm warm—Lucas—!"

Then his eyes opened to look into Nathan's, too close for comfort, at the edge of the bed. "It hurts!" His voice was thin and young and painfully surprised. The shadowy little boy again looked through the thicket of pain and whiskers and age. Then his eyes closed and his body twisted as he cried out in a ragged shaken voice.

And Adina wailed from her corner.

Mama straightened up, her hand pressing the swell of her side. She smoothed her hair back with both hands, her eyes shut, her chin tightly lifted. Then she shrugged herself wearily, twisting to ease her own aching.

"Go get them," she said. "He can die if he wants to, but not like this. Not to kill us all with him. Go get Eliada and that man—"

"And Moorma!" Adina was prancing at Mama's elbow. "Get Moorma!"

"Get them all," said Mama. "He can talk about evil, but by their fruits ye shall know them—"

Nathan heard the last words fade as he pounded across the front yard. *Why, it's daylight,* he thought, astonished. *The sun is shining!*

Halfway across the ruined field, he faltered and stumbled. They were coming! All of them! Fast! Don't ask how they come. Don't think of how they come! *A band of angels, coming—*

Three grown-ups and Eliada and the little girl and a cradle—the cradle—tell me a story—

"We have waited," said Eliada, taking Nathan's hand to hurry him back to the cabin. "Each day we have been

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renewing our strength through the Power, and we have waited. We can help! Oh, truly, Nathan, we can help!"

Mama and Nathan hunched under the tree across the flat from the cabin. Adina had slipped sideways across Mama's lap, and slept, her hands still tightly interlaced under her chin.

Eliada had told them when they were banished from the cabin: "If you have a way of coming into the Presence—to speak the Name—"

"We can pray," he told her.

"Pray," she said. "Help us with your prayers."

And the family had prayed—aloud and silently—until the words blurred and Adina could only remember *Now I lay me.* Now Mama's head was leaning back against the tree trunk, her eyes closed, her breath coming quietly.

Nathan looked around. *It is a good country,* he thought. *Everything about it is good—now. If only we* could—could be more like the country. Open—busy—growing—His head drooped with his heavy eyes. *With singing and wings and how big the snowflakes are—the stars*—and he slept.

He woke, too warm in the late afternoon sun, his neck aching, his mouth dry. He straightened his neck cautiously with the pressure of one hand—and his whole body throbbed with alarm before he knew it was Eliada. She was sitting quietly in the pool of her skirts, her hands loosely clasped in her lap.

She smiled and said quietly, "He is sleeping."

Mama woke to the strange voice.

"We have done what we could—the Power helping," said Eliada. "His leg—" she faltered. "It was bad. We got it straight again, and secured, and have started it back from the—the—"

"Infection," supplied Mama. "The infection—" She was getting awkwardly to her feet, leaving Adina fisting weary eyes.

"Yes, the infection." Eliada drifted up to her feet. "It will be long, but it will get well. Already we are planning a Rejoice for when he walks again—our first Rejoice since—"

"Moorma—where's Moorma?" Adina grabbed at Mama's skirt and hugged a handful of it tightly to her face before Mama broke away to hurry stiffly toward the cabin.

"She is waiting for you," Eliada said, smiling. "She found a—a play people of yours. It looks like a little girl—"

"My doll!" cried Adina. "Where did she find it? I lost it—"

"It's in the green growth by the animals' house. She would not touch it, until you came—but she is singing to it."

"Moorma!" called Adina. "Moorma!" as she ran toward the lean-to, make shift barn.

Eliada and Nathan went toward the cabin to meet Mama. Her face was smoother and younger. "He's sleeping," she said. And the breath she took

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seemed to push away all the burdens she had been carrying.

"Before he slept," said Eliada. "He was much troubled because of—of the fields. That, we think we know. And the—the crops. That we do not know. We must know to put it right so that his rest will not be broken by worry."

Mama turned to Nathan. He felt suddenly grown up.

"Our field was practically ruined by the floods," he said. "We were trying to clear another field to get ready to plant. The crops are what we grow—" he half smiled at Eliada. "And we grow things besides corn, too. If we are too late with the planting, we'll have nothing to eat when winter comes."

"Oh! We know crops!" said Eliada happily. We know growing and harvesting! At Home—at Home!—"

"Roth—" she called. "Marilla—Dor—"

They came sedately, quickly across the yard to meet Mama and Nathan halfway. Marilla held the baby with the wild-rose-pink dress against her shoulder, and Dor's arm across her back steadied her in case of roughness.

The two groups looked at each other. Then smiled. Then they were strangers no more.

"Roth," said Eliada eagerly. "The crops are the things—" She and the men—Nathan grew up some more—huddled under the tree to plan.

Marilla and Mama, who was now holding the baby and smiling—went back toward the cabin, talking supper and baths for a weary, hungry family.

There was never a happier made field in all the world, Nathan thought in the days that followed. Laughter and foolishness and fun—except when Papa came to watch the world, helped by Roth and Dor. Slowly out into the thin shadows near the field he would come, not knowing that even his one good leg never took all his weight. Then, settled cautiously in his big chair, sometimes with Mama sitting near him, he watched the effort and the sweating, the blister-raising labor that went with clearing and leveling the field.

Papa was satisfied when the men individually came to the shade to drink great, dribbling drinks of the spring water and to splash their sweating faces and heads with coolness, then pause briefly to catch their breaths. Papa could accept this, Nathan knew, because—by the sweat of your brows thou shalt—whatever you had to do to get things to eat. Papa distrusted anything that was too easy. But he could accept the neighborly help in time of need. He felt bound to do the same for those who had a need.

The making of the field was a long, hot, hard job—when Papa was watching. But, oh! when Papa had been helped back into the cabin! It was still hard and hot and heavy—but not blister-making. And Nathan had learned to laugh and he laughed often—

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with surprise and pleasure and astonishment—and just sheer enjoyment. And his ribs never quite broke—it only felt that way. They weren't used to laughter movements.

He saw, one day, the reason why the roots around Eliada's field looked like radishes. They had been pulled up, bodily, like radishes.

"Together like that, at the Home," said Eliada as they watched Marilla, Dor and Roth, hovering in a hand-holding circle above the last big tree to be uprooted. "Making the Circle. Remembering, 'We are gathered in Thy Name,' then the Power arrives to be used. That's the way they sealed the ships, on the Home, before we left—"

Nathan turned, thoughtfully, away from her struggle with tears, to watch the tree. It lurched and creaked and lifted, rocks and dirt jolting off in chunks from its roots as it rose. It shook the roots free and drifted over to the edge of the field. And the three workers drifted down to a far shade, thinly, wearily still against the ground.

"But you didn't pull up the ships," said Nathan, wondering if he was just helping Eliada make up a story. But the stories she told—

"No," said Eliada. "But I watched while the Old Ones finished our craft. The outside of it was made in pieces, you know, as the cabin is made of individual logs. So, to finish it, they made the Circle and—and the whole outside of the craft wrinkled and flowed and stilled and became one, a shell for all the craft." Eliada was sadly-happy, back on the Home.

A shout across the field brought them to their feet.

"The last one!" shouted Roth. "Oh, rejoice—rejoice!" And the three grown-ups shot across the field, tumbling and soaring, diving and twisting like young wild things set free, up and up!

And Eliada was gone, romping in the air over the field, joining in the song that lifted brightly, clearly. Nathan heard the high, thin piping of Moorma's voice as she lifted jerkily, uncertainly, up from the edge of the field, to be gathered in by the others and tossed, with laughter and delighted shrieking, from one to another of the laughing, singing group.

Adina came through the underbrush and stood by Nathan, watching with longing, as Nathan was.

"I wish I could," she said, lifting her arms and rising on her tiptoes. Then she sighed and lowered her arms. "Well, anyway, the baby can't yet. I'll go play with her."

When she was safely gone on her way back to the shade where the baby lay in the cradle, Nathan lifted his arms and came, clumsily, to tiptoe. He gave a longing little hop. Then hunkered down on a fallen log, hunched over his soundless, welling cry—*Oh, if only I could! If only I could!*

Then the plows came! Theirs and Papa's, snicking past the idle, astonish-

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ed horses, slicing through the field, each with one of the workers hovering as an attendant, who at the first click of a rock, whisked it out of the way, arching through the air, to the rock pile filling in one of the gashes across the land.

Then, the first plowing done, came the rippling of the land as though it were a quilt on a bed, shaking across, filling hollows and smoothing humps, until the whole field lay smooth and dark and ready.

Papa watched some of the furrowing. And some of the planting. And said, heavily pleased, to Mama one evening, "Many hands make light work."

And Mama's eyes crinkled at Nathan as she snipped off her sewing thread with her front teeth and snapped another knot in her sewing threed and bent again to a wild-rosebud-pink ruffle for Adina's new Sunday dress.

Tell us a story, Eliada," said Adina, softly, in the darkness of the loft. Because, in and out of the hours and days and the long evenings, Eliada had told Adina and Nathan much of the Home. She sighed for the lostness of the Home. They sighed for the wonder of her stories.

"Story!" Moorma's voice was high and clear. "Story!"

"Shh!" said Adina. "Don't wake Papa and Mama!"

"Don't wake Papa and Mama." Moorma's voice was as light as a breath.

Eliada and Moorma were staying the night at the cabin because their folks had gone somewhere, at sunset, their eyes excited and hopeful, their attention long gone ahead of their last goodbyes.

"Tell us a story, Eliada," Nathan repeated from his far, alone corner. "About the Crossing again." *If only Lucas could hear her! Oh, if only!*

"—so when we found the Home would be destroyed, we made ships to take us away. There were three in our valley and we were assigned to one of them. And my cousin was filled with sorrow—"

"Because her love had to go in another ship—" Adina's voice mourned for them.

"Yes," said Eliada. "And then, at the last moment, Evalee was Called, so she left the ship—"

"Called?" asked Adina, knowing the answer—

"Called back to the Presence," said Eliada. "Her days totaled. Always, at Home, we were Called before we went back into the Presence. So we had time for our farewells and to put things in order and to give to our families and friends the personal things we want them to have. And, most important, time to cleanse ourselves of anything that might make it hard to return to the Presence that sent us forth." Eliada sighed deeply. "At Home—at Home—there was time. We could go

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quietly Otherside, loving hands holding ours, back into the Presence, and have our castasides put in some shadowy place among the growing things, in the cool, growing soil—but —but here—we were so snatched—"

"So snatched—" Moorma parroted in her light, now-yawning, voice.

"Tell about the moon," said Nathan, to turn Eliada's thoughts.

"The moon—" Eliada's voice crinkled a little in the darkness. "When we first saw the moon, we hoped it was our new Home, because we knew we could not go as far as another sun. But when we skimmed just above its surface for all those miles and saw it all dead and dry and pocked with holes and not a blade of green and with only a thin slice of shadow far on the horizon, we were *afraid* it would be our new Home!

"Then we swept to the other side, and saw—"

"Our world!" cried Adina, softly. "Our world!"

"Our world," said Eliada. "All clouds and blue and wonderful! We sang! Oh, how we sang for journey's end and the loveliness offered us—" Her voice broke abruptly.

"But you had forgotten—" reminded Nathan.

"We had forgotten," sighed Eliada. "For so many years there had been no need to know how to move the ships, or take them into other atmospheres; so we had forgotten. During all the journey, the motivers had sought back through all of us and our memories of our Befores, to find the skills they needed, but they were not wise enough. They knew too little. They could do so few of the things that should have been done. Our ship was alone now. All the others had other parts of the sky to search. They were too far for us to work together to get the knowledge we needed before—"

"Before the air—" prompted Adina.

"Before the air," said Eliada. "Like a finger of flame pulled along our ship. By then we were all in our life slips—each all alone—to leave the craft before we died of the heating. Then we moved our slips—or our parents moved us, if we were not of an age to have the skill. And, out there all alone in the empty dark, I saw the ship glow brighter and brighter and—and flow apart and drip down and down—" A sob broke the story.

"Don't tell any more," said Nathan, groping through the multitude of new pictures tonight's story fanned out in his mind. "We shouldn't ask you. It makes you—"

"But telling it helps to end the pain," said Eliada. "I cannot change what happened, but I can change the way I remember it.

"I saw the life slips around me dart down through the air like needless of light, and I got caught up in trying to remember how to move mine—how to bring mine down safely—"

Silence filled the loft, and the wind

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spoke softly to one corner of the cabin.

"It was so wonderful to find we could breathe unshielded right from the beginning. And that there was land, and trees and the food and water were friendly to us. And some of us had landed close together—"

"We put into the new soil the castasides of those who were Called by the time we landed. My brother. Moorma's parents. Roth's wife and little boy. But not—" hope glowed. "Not my parents. Not Roth's daughter. Not Moorma's older brother. So perhaps somewhere, they are still alive—maybe half the world away—wondering if we are still alive. But maybe—"

In the silence, the even breathing from Adina's corner told that she and Moorma were sleeping.

Eliada lifted onto one elbow and spoke to the darkness where Nathan was. "That's where they have gone, Roth, Marilla and Dor. Roth thinks he has been hearing the Questing of the People. Somewhere, not too far away. If they can find—maybe it will be—"

She lay back with a sigh. "It is hard to wait. But—weeping endureth for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. That was in the book we read to comfort the one who lived in our cabin before he was Called from his broken body. To find a book that has the thoughts—the words—and even—" her voice was hardly a whisper—"even our Brother— Truly, though I take the wings of the morning—"

The wind spoke softly again. Moorma murmured in her corner. And the quiet breathing of sleep was the only sound in the loft.

"Tell us a story, Daddy," said Little Lucas. "Tell about those People and the happy field."

"Isn't very happy now," said Nat, roughly, pretending disinterest. "'s where the lumber yard is."

"Lumber yards are happy!" Dena protested. "They smell of forest and they build houses—"

"When it was the happy field," said Nathan, leaning back in Papa's big old chair, about the only thing left from the old cabin. "Ours was the only cabin for ten miles or so, except where—those People lived."

"That's where the school is now!" cried Dena, perching on one of the rockers, clinging to Nathan's arm. "At the end of Koomatka road."

"Koomatka!" scoffed Nat. "Crazy Indian names!"

"It isn't Indian," said Nathan automatically, his eyes far and seeking. "On their Home, the People had a fruit call *Koomatka.* It tasted like music sounds and was for special holidays—They sang—they had songs for every—"

"Tasted like music—" The children snuggled down into themselves on the floor with quick, happy looks at each other. It had worked! Daddy was started on a People story!

"—and they came back the next day, so happy they could hardly land

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in our front yard. And they had brought three more of the People with them—starving—broken—raggedy. They had never found a settling place since their Landing. And Mama cried while she helped Marilla bathe and care for them. They had come to our place because two of the new People were Eliada's parents. They had to let her know—and Mama could help. Eliada couldn't help. All she could do was hover— *half the time* above *the bed*—so close they had to keep pushing her out of the way. Finally they told me to take her out under the big tree across the yard. So I did. And I held onto her there until she suddenly—like fainting—was asleep across my lap.

"The other one they found was Moorma's brother—Perez. He had cared for the others and defended them and starved so they could eat and was strong until they got him to our place, and then he collapsed—"

"But they got well!" Little Lucas was anxious—as always—clambering up to lean hard against Nathan's arm.

"They got well." Nathan nodded, his arm tight about Little Lucas' fragile shoulders, wondering that Lucas was in the face of his child as he had been in Papa's face—Papa—

"Papa was pleased at how well the field did," said Nathan. "He even thanked the People for helping him." The children settled back around him, used to sudden changes in Daddy's stories, after Daddy thought.

"Besides the field, we had our kitchen garden, and it grew more than enough to feed us—and them too, if they had needed it. But—"

The long, old sorrow was as piercing as when it was new. No, it couldn't be—or how could you live?

"But they went away," prompted Dena.

"They went away," said Nathan. "Perez—his gift was communications—had spent an hour every day, sending out their Questing call. He changed the hour every day in case someone was listening at a different time. And he finally got an answer.

"'*A Group!*' Perez could hardly speak. '*A lot of families! So many! So many of our old Group! And they're coming! They have a craft!*' he laughed, half crying. '*A little cobbled-together, busted-up thing!*' they said. *But they're coming as soon as the dark of the moon, so no one—*'"

"And they went away—" Little Lucas' voice was sad.

"In an airship!" cried Nat, his eyes big with his crowding dreams.

"And left the cradle for when Gramma's little baby came." Dena looked at the cradle by the fireplace, with Adina's play-person, tattered and fragile, still in it. "And the baby was *my* Uncle Luke!" she said triumphantly.

"And mine, too!" hastened Little Lucas. "And I'm named after him!"

"Daddy." Dena leaned against his knees, her eyes intent on his face.

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"Were you sorry when they went?"

"Sorry—" Even this long after, he hadn't been able to change much the way he 'remembered it.' He could never forget the quick smother of Eliada's embrace. And his stiffness that could not relax quickly enough to close his arms around her. There had been a quick, smooth swirl of her hair across his face. And she was gone. Up into the dark yawning of that door that waited, treetop high above the yard. Then the whisperings came—but not through his ears. All the thankings and rememberings and then the final—*Rest secure in the Presence through the Name and the Power.*

And they were gone—somewhere far. Somewhere West. But—scant comfort—still in this world.

"Don't cry, Daddy," said Dena, patting his cheek.

"Men don't cry!" scoffed Nat.

No, men don't cry—but boys do. Face-down in the darkness in the grass behind the big tree, wetting huddling sleeves through with hot tears—crying for a magic that was gone and could never come again.

"Yes, I was very sorry," said Nathan. But—

Nathan looked around the good room, felt the blessed warmth of Miriam, busy in the kitchen, and the wholeness of his life. The tightness inside him began to loosen, as it always finally did.

"We'll hug you happy," said Dena. And the three children clustered and climbed on the chair and on his lap—even Nat, who sometimes now was too old to hug people happy.

So—life widens. All kinds of loves come. Others come into the circle to complete it. And someday—maybe Otherside—but someday Eliada would be there again, sitting in the pool of her skirts, her hands lightly folded in her lap, her luminous eyes smiling and her soft voice saying:

"Tell us a story, Nathan. Tell us all the wonderful story of after we left—"

Coming next month

"All the Lies That Are My Life" by HARLAN ELLISON. This brand-new novella is something unusual, even for Ellison. It is not precisely fantasy or science fiction; it might be described as a true-life novella, more than somewhat autobiographical, and it is Ellison at his gripping and controversial best. The November issue is on sale September 30.

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Walter Tevis is a professor of English at the University of Ohio and is best known as the author of The Hustler *and the classic sf novel* The Man Who Fell to Earth. *He also wrote a lovely short for F&SF back in 1958 called "Far From Home." His most recent novel is* Mockingbird, *just published by Doubleday, and his latest short story appears below.*

Echo

BY
WALTER TEVIS

"How many electrodes are there in that thing?" Arthur said.

Mel gave him an irritated look. "More than anyone could count, old buddy." He was checking some of the connections of the coils that went from the big tape recorder to the helmet; they were as profuse on the helmet as Medusa's snakes. Arthur and Mel had left the party upstairs to come down to Mel's basement laboratory. Mel taught paraphysics at the university.

"You mean you don't *know* how many there are? You put the fucker together and you don't know yourself?"

"*I* didn't put the fucker together, old buddy." Mel gave a jerk to the coil between his hands, and somewhere deep in the recording device there was a *click*. "A Hewlitt-Packard computer did. I only told it what to make, and it made it."

Arthur just stared at him. Then he took an annoyed swallow from the glass of whiskey in his hand. *These goddamn paraphysicists. It would be just like the sons of bitches not to want to know how many connections you had to make to record an entire human mind.* But he said nothing. When Denise had talked him into doing this dumb thing, he had made enough objections. Such as, "Why me? Why should I be the guinea pig for some crazy attempt to make a record of a whole personality?" Denise's answer had merely been, "Because Mel is your *friend*." And so on.

So he sat and drank his drink and watched Mel finish checking out the helmet and submitted quietly when Mel placed the heavy thing on his head. He could just barely see beneath and around dangling wires, and he was wondering how long he would have to put up with it to please his wife and

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Mel when he heard and slightly saw Mel walk over to the recorder and heard him say, "Here we go, old buddy." Then he threw a switch....

And Arthur awoke to a world askew and furred. Something was madly wrong with his vision, even though the wires were gone. His eyes could not encapsulate the scene for him; all he really saw were pale colors, pale lights, some slight movements. There were smells somewhere too, but they made no sense: roses, maybe, and vinegar. Somebody somewhere was singing in Chinese, or Anglo-Saxon. He closed his eyes. Only one thing was certain. He had an erection. He went to sleep.

Even the dreams were not right. They seemed to be someone else's dreams.

Days passed. He woke from time to time and was fed. Sometimes there were tall, slim people in the room with him. They spoke Chinese. Or Anglo-Saxon. Once a long-haired person spoke to him in very strange English, "How are *you*, sir or madam?" He had no answer for that.

Finally he woke up and was able to focus his eyes and brain well enough to see that he was not in his own body. He learned that from his arms, which were hairless and chocolate. Was he a Black? A Polynesian? He did not feel as shocked as it seemed he should have felt. *Drugged? Very likely. Who by? God knows.* He felt of his face. It was all wrong: the nose was too broad, the chin too soft, the ears were too big. *Why is it I'm not upset at this? Drugs?* But then he had been wanting to be dead for over a year, had been thinking of suicide with the intensity that some of his colleagues had when they thought of a promotion. So maybe whatever had happened to him didn't make any difference. If he didn't like it he could always kill himself. And there was no pain in whatever was going on. He felt all right.

A person in a sort of well-tailored red bathrobe came into the room. He was tall and thin and pale, and his face was smiling shyly. His hair was blond and straight and came down nearly to his waist. Or maybe it was a she. But then the person spoke and the voice was male. "How are *you* nowadays?" The man was smiling at him more broadly now.

"I'm okay," Arthur said. "But where am I? And who ...?" He held up his dark-brown arm. "In this...body?"

The other man looked pleased. "It's artful." he said.

Arthur stared at him. *"Artful?"*

The man looked embarrassed. Then he said, "Artificial."

"Artificial?"

"Your body," the man said, with more confidence. "It is artificial now."

"For Christ's sake," Arthur said. And then, "I liked the other one well enough."

The man smiled sweetly. "Long dead," he said. "And rotten."

"Christ," Arthur said. "Jesus Christ."

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* * *

He slept after that, and the next day the long-haired man was there when he awoke. Arthur assumed that a day had passed because the man's bathrobe was yellow this time. Arthur had a question ready. "Where did this body come from?"

The man smiled at him with encouragement. "Cleveland."

He hadn't been ready for that. He felt he might never be ready for whatever this childlike and epicene person might tell him. "Did you grow this body in Cleveland, or something?"

"Or something is correct. We made you first in Cleveland in bodily form before we grew you big in here. The mind was poured into you. Poured into your pretty and always body." The man looked at him quizzically. "Bodies not made in Cleveland in your time?"

"In my time?"

"In your time of the world. When you was alive and well and running around."

Arthur continued to stare. "Is this the *future?*" he said.

The man shook his head. "It's only nowadays," he said. "Like always." Then he smiled. "And you was born in the twenty-second century anno domini, in crowded times and places?"

Arthur let out a heavy sigh. Then he said, "Can you get me a drink? With whiskey or gin? Ethyl alcohol?"

The man did not seem to understand.

"An intoxicating drink."

The man smiled again. "I understand that thing. And, yes, I will." He turned to leave the room. "Not the twenty-second century anno domini?"

"The twentieth," Arthur said in a voice near a whisper. Finally it was all coming down on him. "What century is this?"

The man turned and smiled at him before he left the room. "The forty-seventh," he said. "Anno domini."

The drink turned out to be a sort of screwdriver — spiked orange juice. And it was in a simple glass that did not look at all futuristic. After Arthur drank it, he said, "How did I get here? In this body from ... from Cleveland?"

"Refrigerator," the man said. "We found a refrigerator, all wrapped and sealed underground where a city was. With a tape of you inside. Under rubble. From time so far and distant long agone so hard to tell."

From time so far and distant long agone.... "Have you a name?" Arthur asked.

"Yes. I am always Ben."

"Ben?"

"Yes. Always Ben."

Arthur began to sit up for the first time. It was not as difficult as he had feared it might be. He felt fairly strong. "What kind of tape, Ben?"

"Oh, machine tape. Ancient computer tape," Ben said. "They had all of you all over on the tape. Except a body."

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Arthur had already figured that one out. Some time or other, even years after that night with the thing on his head, Mel had stuck that tape in a refrigerator for some reason. And twenty-seven centuries later somebody had dug it out, freakishly preserved, and figured out what it was: a record of the memory, mind, imagination, personality, lusts, ambitions, neuroses and everything else of Arthur Witt. Then somebody had gotten some kind of artificial body from a factory in Cleveland and had played the tape into it. And here he was, reconstructed from some point before his life's end. Somewhere out in this strange world the dust of his first life lay; he was now being given a chance to live out the last part of that life again. If he wanted to.

How long had he lived, a near-suicide, back in the twentieth century? Had he killed himself?

"You found me as a recording," he said. "Without a body."

"Yes," Ben said. "And as a student of the Ancient tongue of English and of old times long agone I had you made especially a body. To have a thing to put the tape into so then to talk with me. As we indeed are doing now. A Coca Cola bottle was in the refrigerator. And that was how we knew from so long agone. That bottle is in museum now and going strong. Popular with all who come and look."

"Do you know anything more about me? Like when I ... died? Or about my wife?"

Ben looked sad, his normally smooth forehead wrinkling. "Sorry always." Then he smiled. "All I know for sure and always is America was home for you."

"Okay," Arthur said. Maybe it was better not to know what had become of himself — of that other himself. "Is there still an America?"

Ben continued smiling. "Two. One north and one is always south."

"That's good to know," Arthur said. "Could I have another drink?"

The bathroom was much like a twentieth-century one except that the water from the taps was gently scented and the light coming from the ceiling was like daylight — yellowish and very pleasant to his eyes. Over the sink was a mirror.

He stood and stared at himself for several minutes, shocked.

He was very Negroid and very handsome, with a short afro of glossy black hair, a broad nose, generous ears, thick, intelligent lips and clear eyes. His shoulders were broad, and the chest beneath them was smooth, hairless, and powerful. His stomach was flat, his arms well-muscled but soft-looking, like a woman's.

He stood back to see himself full-length. His body was perfect; there wasn't a blemish on it. He looked at his face again — his new face — and smiled. *What the hell,* he thought, *this beats suicide.*

* * *

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Later, when Arthur was able to walk a little each day, Ben brought others. Some were apparently women — very calm, straightforward types, like Ben. But none of them spoke any English. They all smiled a lot. They were all nice-looking, but a bit forceless, passive; and they all seemed young. He wondered if they had some way of staying young-looking whatever their ages. Probably so. Or maybe their bodies came from another factory in Cleveland.

He liked the sounds of the women's voices, more like Chinese than Anglo-Saxon, soft and slurred in speech and with musical pitch. Sometimes they sang. And he liked the way they moved around and looked over at him, in his bed, from time to time, with curiosity but with no hint of flirtatiousness.

Outside the room's only window, where the view was of an empty field and, beyond that, a dark row of trees, it was raining heavily under an iron-colored sky. There was no work of human building to be seen from that window, only grass and sky and the line of trees.

And then Ben left the room for a while and returned with another woman, different from the others, and stood with her near the door and talked for a moment. Arthur looked at her. She was dressed like the others in some kind of a tan robe. But her hair was cut short and her face had a puzzled animation about it and a sense of some quality — urgency maybe — that was missing in the others. She had very pale skin and auburn hair; she was tall and her figure was splendid.

Ben brought her over and introduced her to him as Annabel. And, surprisingly, she spoke English. He was astonished at this at first, until she smiled and said, "Ben tells me I'm from the same century you're from. We thought it was the twenty-second at first."

"Don't you remember?" Arthur said.

"No," she said. "I don't remember. Something about the way the tapes were played into this body, Ben says. I know how to speak, but I don't remember a thing...." She looked toward Ben.

"It is always amnesia," Ben said. "She was the first to be made from ancient tapes a year ago. But the tapes were not right for her brain so she forgot it all. She forgot all the time long agone when she lived before. Then we made you and did always better with your tape."

"Maybe it's best not to remember," Arthur said.

She smiled at him wistfully. "Still I'd like to know. I don't even know what my name was back then. I'd like you to tell me about our time — the twentieth century — and maybe it'll help me remember."

"Sure," Arthur said. "What do you want to know?"

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For several weeks she came to his room at breakfast and asked questions. He told her about cities and government and clothing and animals and the way things looked and how people lived. But none of it touched her memory. Arthur liked her, and there seemed at times something familiar about her. It made sense that there would be, since she had probably been taped by Mel — possibly after the same dinner party, after he himself had been "copied" onto the tapes. She could be Denise. Except she wasn't, and he knew that. Maybe she was the wife of someone he knew, some woman he had talked to briefly once and then forgot about.... She was clearly as intelligent as he, and as quick; her vocabulary was excellent. And her personality — something about her personality sometimes haunted him. He would be drinking coffee with her and would happen to look at her hand hold the cup or at the way she brought the cup to her lips, and there would be something terribly familiar about it. But he could not place it. It was like *deja vu.*

On his first day outside, with Ben gently helping him walk on wobbly legs, the thing he felt most was the clarity and cleanness of the outside air. It was a spring morning, with small leaves on the trees by the door of the building; on the grass near the door a thick robin stood attentive, its ears cocked towards the ground. A small white dog scampered as such dogs always had toward a hill and then disappeared from view. There was a warm breeze, riffling his kinky hair.

Arthur walked a few yards, then turned to look at the building he had just left for the first time. It seemed to be made of green stone, with a slightly peaked green roof and large windows. Except for the green color it could have been a large bank from downtown St. Louis or Denver. There were five other buildings, more or less like it, making a complex, with gray rubbery walkaways between them. At a distance two long-haired men walked hand in hand in quiet conversation from one building to another, one of them smoking a cigarette. Arthur's heart was light, his stomach fluttery with the warmth of the day and the sense of the new. They walked around the building and then Arthur stood and looked towards the dark green line of woods in the distance and then they went back inside; he was still too weak to walk any more. But he could tell that the body he inhabited was healthy and youthful and would soon be strong. There were good, firm muscles under the brown skin; his arms and legs were straight, well-formed; and there were good, springy arches in his feet. His hands were capacious and wise; he could sense the power, the aptitude and heft, of them.

The next day he took Annabel for a walk, going about a third of the way down the gray path towards the woods

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before he became too tired to go further.

They said little. For a few moments he took her hand, but he sensed something in her that stiffened when he did so. And, somehow, he himself felt no desire for her, even though she was clearly a lovely woman, and he could not understand why. There was nothing wrong with his sexuality in this new and young body; even in his old haggard and soft one there had been no problems there. He had always been a strong lover; that alone had kept him going for years against the tide of his old life that had pulled so strongly in other ways towards death. Towards drink, and guilt, and alienation and despair.

But Annabel with her fine breasts and firm round ass did not turn him on, and he could not understand it.

Later, in his room, when she was in a chrome and leather chair and he was lying against the pillows in bed, he tried talking about it. "If this were a movie," he said, "we would be falling in love by now."

She looked towards him thoughtfully. "I suppose so. I think I may be homosexual. A Lesbian."

He looked at her. What she said seemed true. Maybe that explained his lack of feeling towards her. "Do you find the women here attractive?"

"No," she said and then smiled at him. "I bet you don't either."

He smiled back. "No, I don't," he said. And then: "Why don't you come over here and kiss me on the mouth? It couldn't hurt anything."

"Okay," she said and got up. She walked over towards him, seated herself on the edge of the bed, bent over slowly, and kissed him, with her mouth open and soft. At first he felt almost nothing, as though he were kissing the smooth palm of his own hand. But they held the kiss and, gradually, he felt an excitement begin in his stomach. It was a different feeling from what he was used to; there was some kind of very strong, and very frightening power to it. He continued kissing her, working his lips a bit now but not using his tongue and not reaching his hands towards her breasts that hung down over his chest. There *was* some great power there, but something in him would not let him yield to it. There was something he was afraid of. He pulled away from her and looked up. Her face was very serious and just a bit frightened.

"Something is scaring me," he said quietly.

"Me too," she said. "I think I'd better go."

She got up from the bed and left the room without saying goodbye. He lay there silently for a long while, thinking of her. Somewhere deep in his stomach there was still a ribbon of unpleasantness — of fear. But the fear was being buried by the excitement of desire, becoming indistinguishable from it.

In the middle of the night he was awakened by her wet mouth kissing his

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breasts, under the sheet. He could smell the faint smell of sweat from her warm body — had been smelling it even while asleep. It aroused him immediately. Then without saying a word she moved her head down to him and took him in her mouth. Still in his stomach was the ribbon of fear, but the excitement, the movement toward ecstasy, buried it. And he exploded into her mouth, beneath the sheet. She stayed with him, holding his hips, for only a minute afterwards and then left, padding slowly — somehow, it seemed, thoughtfully — out of the room in bare feet, leaving him alone in a wet bed. Neither of them had said a word.

He did not see her the next morning at breakfast; for several days she had been joining him for the farrago of oats and wheat and honey that a silent male nurse brought him every morning together with a yellow cup full of powerful, nearly astringent coffee. Nor did she join him for his lunch of odd-looking vegetables and what he thought of as "Mystery Soup."

Ben dropped in on him after lunch for a conversation about Twentieth Century America; Arthur told him about movies and cars. His heart wasn't in it; he could not get Annabel off his mind.

"Are there still cars?" he asked Ben.

"Oh, no. Very little mechanical nowadays."

"How do you travel?"

"Walking. Always walking," Ben said. "Sometimes we use a flyer, for traveling long."

"Is a flyer an airplane?"

"Somewhat," Ben said. "But no motor and no jets."

"How does it work?"

"Nobody knows," Ben said. "No need to know."

"Who does the cooking around here?"

"Cooking?" Ben said.

"Yes. Preparing food to eat." He almost said "always" before "eat."

"Food is always assembled," Ben said. "Assembled from little atoms by the cooker. Like clothes and buildings."

"Oh," Arthur said, and thought *Jesus*. "Then nobody does any work?"

"I study things. Always Ancient America. Others study things. And we talk a lot."

"And that's all you do?"

Ben smiled at him benignly. "Always."

"I've never seen any children around, Ben. Do you have children in other places?"

"No. No children. And there are only very few and small other places and no children there. Only big ones like you and me."

"Then what...? Then how do you reproduce?"

Ben smiled and shook his head. "Oh, we never reproduce. We always live ourselves. Always."

"You're *immortal*?"

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"Oh, of course," Ben said. "We live forever. And you indeed will live forever too in that strong body."

"*Jesus,*" he said aloud and lay back against the pillows. And then: "Don't you get *bored?*"

"Oh, sure," Ben said. "But it goes away. And we forget a lot and always learn things over."

"How old are you, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "I never know at all how old. Centuries. Someday I'll die myself by fire as others do and that will be an end."

"Then someday you'll tire of it and kill yourself. And that's been happening for some time now and there aren't many left."

Ben smiled dolefully, his long and youthful and bland face registering a kind of pleasant painfulness. "That's all there is to know," he said.

Ben turned to leave, walking out of the room with his light, loose-jointed gait, his long hair covering his narrow shoulders and back. At the door he stopped and turned back towards Arthur. "Long life is good enough for most," he said, "and death is not so bad."

Arthur said nothing. When Ben was gone he began working at the room's little table on the chess set he was making from a soft material like Styrofoam. He was using a knife that Ben had gotten him, and he began working on the most difficult pieces, the knights, carving them with a great deal of care.

When he had finished the first one and had begun to copy it for the second, Annabel came in. She was wearing a green robe and she looked beautiful to him.

At first he did not know what to say. Then he looked at her and said, "Thanks. Thanks for last night."

"Sure," she said. "It was strange. But I liked it."

"Then you aren't a Lesbian," he said, trying to make his voice light but feeling some kind of embarrassment in it. He set the unfinished piece and the knife on the desk in front of him and swiveled in the chair to see her better. She was tall and fair-skinned — a beautiful woman. "Would you like to take a walk?" he said. "I think I could make it to the woods."

She was silent for a minute. Then she said, "Sure." She walked over to the table and carefully, thoughtfully, picked up the finished piece and held it between thumb and forefinger. "This is a knight," she said.

He stared at her. "How did you know that?" Chess did not exist, as far as he had been able to find out, in this world. Ben's people did not play games. "It's a twentieth-century thing."

"I don't know," she said. "I really don't. I just know it's called a knight."

"Do you know what 'chess' means?" he said.

"'Chess'?" She said the word carefully. "No. No, I don't."

He shook his head and then took

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the piece from her and set it down by the finished pawns. "Let's take that walk."

While they were walking and he had his hands in the pockets of his robe and his eyes down on the strange plastic shoes he had been given, he said, "Ben tells me I'll be very strong when my body has a chance to ... to ripen or whatever it is.

"Do you look the way you looked before? In your other life?" she said.

"No," he said. "God, no. I was white, and middle-aged. A professor of chemistry and getting pot-bellied."

"Yes," she said. "I have no idea what I looked like, but I know it wasn't like this." She extended her long and pale arms from her sides, palms upward, and looked earnestly at him. "I know I'm entirely different now from what I once was."

"It's a strange feeling," he said. "Still, the way you look now is fine by me." But that wasn't exactly true; there was a touch of idle and self-assuring flattery in it. She was beautiful enough, but he still was not at ease with her beauty. And something about it haunted him as though at times there were superimposed upon her face and body another face and body, from his past, very faint but disquieting.

He did make it to the woods although he was very fatigued when he got there. Ben had told him it would take months to get the full strength of his new body. The body had been cloned from synthetic, composite genes, but it had never been exercised and its muscles were soft and new.

In the woods they sat on a fallen log and smoked the odd-tasting cigarettes that Ben supplied them with. Then they began to make love slowly and cautiously. First with their hands and then their mouths. He brought her to a light orgasm in the spotted daylight that filtered through old trees, while she sat on the log dreamily and he kneeled in front of her. After that, they found a grassy clearing with dry ground and lay together. Somehow they seemed perfectly matched and seemed to know exactly what to do for each other.

But then, as he was beginning to feel the oncoming orgasm, she looked down on him from her position above him and said, "Jesus, do I love this." And the words fell somehow like lead on his spirit, and he became suddenly afraid, frozen in his movements. And the same fear came in her face. They stared at each other while his soul shrunk from her. He did not know what had happened; he only knew that her words — words that were somehow terribly familiar to him — had frightened him. Forest light flecked her beautiful and glowing skin; her fine breasts were warm in his upward reaching hands; somewhere a bird was singing jubilantly, and wind rustled the leaves of the trees. Inside himself he was cold, trembling. He rolled out

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from under her and lay on the grass in turmoil — frightened and angry. "What happened?" he said.

"I don't know. I said that, and something went wrong. I don't know."

He shook his head. "Maybe it's these new bodies," he said. "Maybe we'll have to just get used to them."

She shook her head and said nothing.

He did not see her for several days and was relieved not to. He spent the time easily enough — when he was not troubled by thinking about her — finishing his chess set, exercising lightly, and wandering through the building where he lived.

On the third day Ben and another man whose only English was the word "Hello" took him to the far end of the building to a laboratory. There were four large tanks, coffin-like and bright green, lined up along one wall. Ben walked over to the second of these from the left, set his long-fingered hand on its lid, and said, "This is where we grew your self for years."

Arthur walked over to it and Ben lifted the hinged lid for him. Inside, it was like a large green bathtub, with about half a dozen little metal pipes entering it on one side. "How long was I in this thing?" he asked.

"Three years," Ben said. "No way to go faster."

"And was it difficult to play the tape into ... into me?"

Ben smiled and shook his head. "Oh, yes," he said. "We did it wrong two times. First we had the body wrong and next the tape. But then we got you always right and here you stand." Then he looked at the other man with him, who was apparently some kind of technician, and the other nodded towards Ben with a faint smile.

Arthur started to pursue this, but Ben, abruptly for him, turned and walked over to one of the consoles and took from an otherwise empty shelf a box of about the size of a candy box, walked back to Arthur and handed it to him. "Here is your soul," he said, softly.

Arthur took the box in both hands. "My tape?" he said.

"Of course," Ben said. "Your ancient tape."

Arthur opened the box with care. Inside was a full plastic reel with a label that read "Advent Corporation. Boston, Mass." And under that someone had written with a ballpoint pen, "Arthur Witt."

That evening he finished his chess set and then made a board by ruling the sixty-four squares on a sheet of white, flexible plastic and darkening half of them with what seemed to be a Magic Marker. It was late and he was tired, but he set the pieces up, the white ones on his side of the board, and began to play King's Gambit against the black, using Morphy's way of sacrificing the king's knight for a

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heavy attack on black's kingside. It was strange to see his brown arm and hand moving chess pieces around on a board; he thought he had become used to his new color — even liked it — but it was a shock to see himself in this old context; he had been captain of his chess club in high school, and when other kids had been out shooting basketball or stealing hubcaps or whatever, he had sat in his room at home working out variations of chess attacks. But with a thin white arm, a pale hand on the pieces — not this smooth and chocolate arm with the big and nimble hand at the end of it.

Outside the window was a nearly full moon in a jet-black sky. The window was open, and warm air, hinting of summer nights, filled the room. He could hear the shrill sounds of tree frogs and somewhere a cricket.

Then the door opened quietly and Annabel walked in. He turned to look at her. She was barefoot, dressed in a white robe. Her hair had been pulled back and was tied behind her head, framing her face. She was lovely. He felt tense, frightened. "What do you want?" he said.

"I wanted to make love the way I did before. I thought you would be asleep." Each word came to him as if it had been spoken for him before, as if he had thought it just before she said it. *Deja vu.* He shook his head, trying to shake it off.

"No," he said, "I don't want that right now."

"I know," she said. She took off her robe and sat on the edge of the bed. "I think we ought to start where we left off yesterday."

He stared at her as she lay back, naked, against a pillow. "I don't know if I can...."

"Yes, you can," she said. "That was only a barrier for us. We've crossed it now."

"I was thinking something like that myself," he said. He came over and sat beside her on the bed.

"Sure you were," she said. "We're really very much alike. We think the same things."

He slipped off his sandals. "You're really something," he said.

"So are you," she said.

And she was right. The barrier, or whatever it was, had fallen. The fear had subsided. The pleasure of lovemaking was different from what it had been before for him, with all of the women he had had. It was very inward, very intense. He hardly looked at her.

When he climaxed something seemed to open up inside him. There was a sense of release in a secret part of himself, at the center of his aching and suicidal life. His eyes were shut and he heard himself laughing, immersing himself in himself.

He lay back afterwards, spent and blissful. They did not speak, nor did they look at one another. He stared at the moon outside the window, the ear-

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ly summer moon, as cold and luminous and clear in the black sky as was his soul within himself.

They slept together that night for the first time. Not touching, but naked together in the same bed, each on his right side in a nearly fetal position, like a pair of twins.

In the morning they awoke silently together and silently drank coffee, sitting side by side in bed. There seemed to be no need to speak.

And then, as they were drinking their second cup of coffee, she began looking at something on the other side of him, and he saw that it was the chessboard, still set up from the night before. She was looking at it intently. And her eyes began to widen.

"What is it?" he said. "Is something wrong?"

"That's the King's Gambit," she said. "Morphy's Attack."

Something prickled at the back of his neck and he heard a tremor in his own voice. "*Yes, it is,*" he said.

"And the next move is bishop takes bishop's pawn." She turned and stared at him, her eyes wide and her lips trembling.

"Yes," he said. "Bishop takes bishop's pawn.... Not many people know that."

"I've known it since high school," she said. "Grover Cleveland High School. Where I was...."

"Captain of the chess team." His voice was like gravel in his throat. His heart was pounding and his mouth dry. "Ben's mistake," he said, whispering because his dry mouth made him whisper it. "You're Ben's wrong body."

And she whispered too. "I'm Arthur Witt," she said.

"Oh Jesus," he said. "Oh sweet Jesus." He lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling for a long while. And then, later, when a calmness had come into him and he let his hand reach out slowly and gently and let it fall sensuously upon her smooth and cool thigh he felt, at exactly the same instant, her hand soft and sexual upon his own thigh. "Oh, yes," he said aloud, softly. "Oh, yes."

And he heard her say it too. "Oh, yes. Oh, yes."

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Books

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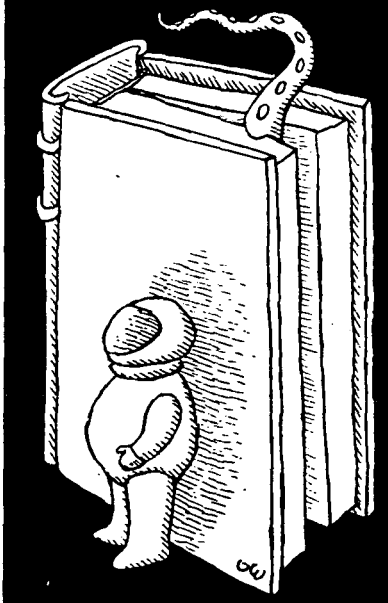

The Number of the Beast, Robert A. Heinlein, Fawcett Columbine trade paperback, $6.95

Wizard, John Varley, Berkley/Putnam, $11.95

A Storm of Wings, M. John Harrison, Doubleday, $8.95

There are two ways to review Robert A. Heinlein's work since *Stranger in a Strange Land*, excepting, of course, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. With that exception, there is a pre-1961 Heinlein and then there is this "new" fellow. He's not all that damned new, once you look at the dates. The "old" Heinlein, revered by every fan of Golden Age "Modern" science fiction, now represents barely more than half the total career-span. His word-count is still much higher, but the "new" one is catching up fast, considering the length of his individual works.

The old Heinlein was a crisp, slick wordsmith of uncommon intelligence and subtlety. His gift for characterization was sharp within its narrow limits, and those limits were fortuitously placed to include the archetypical science fiction hero as defined by the tenets of Campbellian "Modern" science fiction. All his people talked alike. You could tell the stupid and villainous from the worthy and heroic only by their choices of subject matter. But his dialogue worked; its purpose was to propel the story, and it served quite well.

Underlying the ostensible surface of

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every such Heinlein novel was a contrapuntal Freudian construct, either deliberately worked out or introduced gladly from the subconscious in the course of manuscripting. I don't know which. I believe Heinlein prepared his scenarios meticulously beforehand, then kept himself interested in writing them by taking delight in how his creativity revealed the subtheme to him as the words danced down onto the paper. But that's just a guess. If Heinlein has ever revealed much about what goes on in him as an artist, he hasn't done it anywhere I'm aware of.

The Number of the Beast reflects the quintessence of the "new" Heinlein. Where the pre-1961 writer clung to the old pulp tenets — Tell your story quickly, clearly, basing the resolution on physical action emerging from inner growth, and for God's sake never give the reader a chance to realize there's a writer involved — the new one repudiates them, deliberately.

The new Heinlein hero is perfect to begin with. The world is best served by acknowledging his perfection and acting in accordance as quickly as possible. The plot thread is a rambling one, strung with incidents whose one common purpose is to give the world, and the reader, time and evidence required to work out details of the hero's perfection. The nature of the incidents is not organic to the story. They do not grow out of the hero's explorations of his problem. They can't — he has no problems, only transient difficulties, and this is obvious from the first paragraphs.

Therefor, the incidents can take place anywhere, anytime, and must be attractive in themselves. They are not successively unlocked rooms in an unknown structure, through which the hero must pass to find the ideal egress. They are way-stations on a circular tour of the hero's nature, and they must be furnished to engage the reader's interest as a reader, rather than as an involved rider in the searching hero's head.

That results in a kind of game, with Heinlein visibly his own hero. At times he invents new-ish settings which are actually recalls of typical Heinlein settings. At other times he directly borrows settings — E.E. Smith's Lensman universe, the Land of Oz, and the universe of Lazarus Long. In every case, the reference is to the relationship between conscious author and reader, not between hero and the reader's subconscious role-playing as a hero-surrogate. There can be no doubt on either side that at all times there is a book involved. The magic of forgetting that the reader is actually sitting in a quiet room surrounded by creature comforts — that special magic which is what reading does for most of us — cannot occur. *The Number of The Beast* is a book for critics; for the reader as critic, not as participant. It can be impressive. It has cut itself off, by first intention, from any attempt to be compelling.

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All right — *is* it impressive?

Well, no, not if you've read "All You Zombies," in which Heinlein did the cute trick of going back into his Golden Age "By His Bootstraps" and recasting it in the light of the new sexual permissiveness in SF. That was in the March, 1959 issue of this magazine, and because in these post-Campbellian times you can have your hero change sex and impregnate himself, it was possible for Heinlein to do a story in which the hero alone was all the noteworthy characters. It's a nice stunt, of a sort that editors in 1940 would have recoiled from not *primarily* because it was explicit in its sexuality but because such a story implicitly violates the classic requirement that the hero must have been in genuine difficulty; that the storytelling process calls for more than the laying down of cards from a stacked deck, no matter how ingenious the ultimately revealed pattern.

A writer of Heinlein's ability can of course get away with it. First of all, every issue of every pulp magazine serves as evidence that the pulp ideal was not always met, and sometimes was barely approached. Second, it *is* a damned ingenious anecdote, and in terms of the ideal for *anecdotes*, meets it.*

**Not enough stress has been laid on the fact that F&SF's major claim to a place of major importance in the development of SF is the introduction of the magazine SF audience to prose forms very rarely seen in the magazines, and never before in the leading ones.*

There's nothing essential in *The Number of The Beast* which is not subsumed by "All You Zombies," and, alas, by recent previous Heinlein novels. The central thematic idea has not been developed beyond its previous limits. It can't be; it closes itself. All it can do is become more or less overt. Midway through, the characters enter the Lazarus Long universe; the hero becomes totally indistinguishable from Heinlein the author, and the book ends in a phantasmagoric festival at which the participants are all the fictional characters Heinlein has ever written, plus other characters he wishes he had, plus their writers. That is, this novel specifically addresses SF readers as readers; it can succeed only to the extent that you are and have been an SF reader, and only to the extent that you would agree with Heinlein's guest list. It is a book which by its very nature cannot attract new readers to the field, or to Heinlein.

The enabling device, by the way, is a machine which can move people into any place or time in infinity. This means that people and places in fiction have just as much objective validity as real people and places. So it is that Heinlein's hero can visit Oz in flight from a vicious attack by a race of aliens, and Heinlein can climax his book with the aforementioned grand ball, in which it is incidently revealed that the alien menace was a jape all along.

This comes as a very small surprise.

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Thick as the book is, it's obvious halfway through that the pacing will never permit a genuine solution to the problem posed, as if it were a pulp problem, in the opening pages. Furthermore, even the early nature of the book is clearly such that when the solution arrives, it will be talked about rather than shown or given much emotional importance.

This is very much a talking book. The hero flees the menace in company with three other people; his lady love, and an older couple, who are all closely similar aspects of Heinlein. Flitting about in the hero's car, which has been modified into a probability-shift vehicle, these four cannot strike a match without first holding a committee meeting. The sole topic under discussion is protocol, although Heinlein finds many particular instances which require discussion of fresh aspects of protocol. There is a gradual shift from emphasis on military protocol to sexual protocol. The amazing thing to me is that everyone else they encounter is also solely and entirely concerned with protocol, however particularized.

Now, it is possible to assume that this is a reflection of a subtheme; that the book on that level is about the constant yes-no processing of the human brain, and that the brain in question is Heinlein's ... that is, the *only* brain.

But functionally this produces reams of circular dialogue.

Could it, perhaps, be cut back to old Heinlein levels, to reveal an old-style Heinlein novel?

Well, this would put the book into a much closer semblance of an old-style Heinlein novel, yes, especially in its first half.* But the result would be dismaying, since the adventure problem posed graphically and in great first-half detail is eventually dismissed as an offhand trifle. The reader with pulp expectations would be propelled with even greater violence into that it-was-really-all-a-dream denouement of that particular storyline, which would mean getting the feeling of plopping even deeper into marshmallow.

It doesn't matter whether Heinlein knew all along he wasn't going to resolve the plot in pulp terms or whether he decided at some point in the writing that it was O.K. not to. What counts is that at some point preceding the delivery of the manuscript to its publisher, Heinlein, master of all that was best in "Modern" science fiction, a writer capable of working with what is best in pulp and evincing from its parameters that form of reader satisfaction which made the old Heinlein great, consciously resigned as a pulp writer.

Then what kind of writer is the new Heinlein? In a field which has come to see that its potentials extend to "serious" literature, is Heinlein trying to find a form in which he can be perceived as a serious writer?

*Like Stranger in a Strange Land, *this book gives the impression that it is two halves of two essentially different books based on the same general idea.*

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If so, then there's something for him to consider, and I have no doubt that a person of his intelligence has considered it. Under the old pulp rules, what readers admired and wanted more of was the *work*. When they expressed themselves with "Heinlein's great!" what they were saying was that they found the stories signed with Heinlein's byline to be particularly satisfactory, and that they had come to recognize the byline as a dependable source of satisfactory material.

Recent Heinlein work, and in particular this newest example, appears to be intended to present Heinlein to the readers as a person. Potential enjoyment can derive only from approving of Heinlein's tastes, rather than from what Heinlein has done to cater to reader tastes.

I think this is a much chancier proposition, and one which no writer before him has made work satisfactorily. Heinlein the individual is in fact a charming person, and a fund of fascinating remarks and deeds, but readers like to bring something of their own to the fictions they admire. The new Heinlein leaves very little room for that. There is a definite feeling that the ultimate function of this form of writing is to leave no room at all. I wonder how many readers are prepared to participate in such an effort.

As for the other shoe.... The other way to review Heinlein's work is to review his reputation, as if that were what one cared for in preference to the man.

* * *

Wizard is John Varley's sequel to *Titan*, and there's little doubt at least one more novel is planned.

Titan has had a spotty reception. I liked it a great deal, finding it endlessly inventive, full of the particularly attractive furnishings that Varley brings to SF. The locale — a huge, living "artificial satellite" of Saturn, developed biologically by the God-organism Gaea — is a stunner. Contrasted to Larry Niven's Ringworld, which plays on the many attractive features of a mechanically derived environment, Varley's creation steams with a palpable life of its own, reflecting Gaea's fey personality at every turn. It gives its author myriad opportunities to do what he does best: the depiction of exotic biologies. Since he also does a number of other things well, and few things outright clumsily, the total effect is first class.

Not all critics agreed in the case of *Titan*, lending relatively greater weight in their appraisals to the fact that Varley is still not sure of how to pace a novel, or of what events can safely be left offstage.

The problem recurs in *Wizard*. Parts of the narrative read like sketches for a final draft, and others devote a great deal of detail to matters which appear to be fully understandable quite a few words before the author lets go. A few chapters end with a major character about to undertake a difficult and intriguing task; the next begins with

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the deed done. I for instance very much want to actually see Chris'fer Minor climb the Golden Gate Bridge, to pick up his passport to Gaea from the top of the South Tower. I'd expect to learn a great deal about him, and I would have liked to share the adventure. I also don't see why depictions of his lovemaking with Valiha the Titanide centaur were withheld for thousands of words, as if teasingly, and then dismissed — sketchily — in the middle of a rather tedious sequence in which he and Valiha are waiting for her front legs to heal and for her child to be born.

Once born, too, the child doesn't seem to do enough to justify all that pacing back and forth in the waiting room. No doubt he has a larger part in the sequel, but the effect in *Wizard* is to reinforce the impression of a writer who needs a good editor at this stage of his career.

Wizard is not as satisfactory to me as *Titan* is, and my bottom-line reason is that it seems too much like a section between two major components. Cirocco Jones and Gaby Plauget, still physically youthful because of Gaea's intervention in their metabolisms, are very much present. It has been several Titanide generations since the action in *Titan*. Gaby is an engineer, hired on spot jobs by Gaea to take care of things like unsticking a pump that keeps the waterways functioning. "Rocky" Jones is now the Wizard — the arbiter of who among the Titanides will become pregnant. The Titanide-Angel war has ended, with Gaea modifying the Angels' personalities.

The up-front story concerns itself with two new human characters — Chris Major (now that he's climbed the tower), from Earth, and Robin, the witch from an L5 coven where cloning and amniocentesis ensure only female births, Romeo and Juliet are both female, in a play by that classic woman author, Shakespeare, and although lovemaking is open and frequent, Lesbianism is unknown.

Both suffer from obscure incurable diseases, and eventually gain permission to go to Gaea, whose powers as God represent their only hope. They pass stiff tests to get there at all, and once there are told by Gaea that they will be cured only after becoming heroes. Soon enough, both are included in an expedition of Gaby's and Cirocco's to visit all the subsidiary brains located below the spokes running from the hub to the wheel. What they don't know is that Gaby's plan is to somehow involve the lesser brains — one of which is dead, and some of which are crazy or vicious — in an overthrow of Gaea.

Chris's and Robin's stories eventually work out well, and we see a great deal more of Gaea's landscape, and Varley's creativity. Cirocco is a nearly hopeless alcoholic, thanks to the stress of her duties as the Wizard, and there is a sparse and fragmented quality to the depiction of her in this book. Similarly, Gaby does not seem in good fo-

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cus. Some of this is obviously deliberate, but again while this may all pay off in the third book, it makes it difficult to invest much interest in her and her concerns in *Wizard*. I frankly don't understand *why* someone would want to overthrow Gaea, even if she is getting old and cranky, when the obvious thing to do is repair her.

All in all, I hold out considerable hope for the series, and don't want to leave you with the impression that *Wizard* is bad; it's good, it just can't quite stand entirely alone. I wouldn't recommend reading it before *Titan*, and the very best thing to do if you haven't read any of the series is to wait for the third book.

A Storm of Wings is M. John Harrison's long-awaited sequel to *The Pastel City*, a novel neglected by most American critics, myself included. It's hard now to say why I paid no attention to the earlier book, except perhaps that it seemed to be a rewrite of Mark S. Geston's *Lords of the Starship* in the manner of J.G. Ballard. Harrison isn't the sort of writer to make you glad you're alive, and I suspect one more intricately written, cryptically plotted nihilistic book wasn't what I thought the world needed to know about. I don't even have a copy of *The Pastel City;* it went into the Soccer Association rummage sale long ago.

I find myself bitterly regretting that.

Harrison is a romantic of despair, a shaper of striking images of disintegration. His setting is the empire of Viriconium, the pastel city whose wealth and power rose briefly by scavenging from the ruins and enigmatic technological remains of the Afternoon Cultures. Time, for the human race, has stretched so far that it seems in danger of coming apart of its own weight, like a structure of putty; flesh seems mutable, metal simulacra appear more reliable, even if many of them have no purpose. Vicious political struggles

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awaken echoes of our own time and of Medieval history, yet for all their fury have no tangible outcome, in the sense that anything seems settled even in the first instant of victory.

And that's before this new book introduces the concept that an insect race from some distant reality is breaking into this universe as our own commitment to our own reality wanes.

Such characters as Tomb the Dwarf, Methvet Nian, and Cellur of Girvan, Lord of the Birds, recur from the earlier book. Galen Hornwrack, dispossessed lord turned backalley assassin, is I believe a new character. Together with Alstath Fulthor and Fay Glass, of the Reborn, they seek to cope with rumors and reports of insectile armies in the northern highlands. It was Fay who brought the first news to Viriconium. But the Reborn are a failed attempt to reconstruct the bodies and organic brains of people dead long ago; if it weren't for the severed invader head she brings with her, no one would believe her in her feeble attempts to communicate disaster.

I don't imagine Harrison has changed his approach at all. I believe rather that times have changed, and perhaps I've changed, so that while there is no doubt in my mind that this is a mad book with mad conclusions and — to echo the English critical consensus of *The Pastel City* — not fully successful even on its own terms, still and all I don't think we can neglect this one. Harrison is too effective not to be important. And in this case it's all right to start with the second in the series. You'd never notice. But find *The Pastel City* afterward.

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As this issue goes on sale, some 4,000 SF fans are meeting in Boston for the 38th World Science Fiction Convention (NOREASCON II.) Fandom's premier event began in 1939, when about 200 fans convened in New York for NYCON I; and if you have never attended one of these rich and strange events you are missing many things, including, perhaps, being fully able to appreciate the astonishing report that appears below. See you at the bar-tent in 83?*

The World Science Fiction Convention of 2080

BY
IAN WATSON

What a gathering! Four hundred people — writers, fans and both magazine editors — have made their way successfully to these sailcloth marquees outside the village of New Boston.

We know of another three people who didn't make it, and the opening ceremony included a brief "In Memoriam" tribute to each of them, followed by one minute's silence for all. For Kurt Rossini, master of heroic fantasy — slain by an Indian arrow on his way from far California. For Suzie McIntosh, whose amusing woodcuts (sent down by trade caravan from Moose Jaw last summer season) adorn the program booklet — killed by a wolf pack outside of Winnipeg. And for our worst loss, lovely Charmian Jones, acclaimed Queen of Titan in the masquerade at the last Worldcon three years ago in Tampa, whose miniature is worn close to many a fan's heart from the Yukon to Florida Bay — murdered by Moslem pirates during a kidnap raid on Charleston while she was passing through. (Could she have sur-

**If you are interested in finding out more about sf conventions, we suggest a subscription to LOCUS, Box 3938, San Francisco, CA 94119 or SF CHRONICLE, Box 4175, New York, NY 10017.*

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vived seraglio life in North Africa, and even become a bit of a queen there? No! Cut off from the slow percolation of fandom's lifeblood? Never! She defended her honor bravely with a short sword, and died.)

Some dozen others with attending memberships haven't arrived, either. We hope that they're just late — held up by contrary winds or a broken wagon axle. No doubt we will learn in six months or so when their personalzines travel the trade routes.

In the bar tent, around the still, at the ox roast, and in the art tent with its fine embroideries and batiks based on the Old Masters Delany, Heinlein, Le Guin, we greet old friends and colleagues and swap our travel tales. And I thought that my own journey from South Scotland on foot, on horseback, by canal longboat, and finally for five weeks by sailship across the stormy Atlantic (our mortars loaded against raiders) was eventful enough! But compared to some of the others' experiences, mine was a cake run: Indians, Badlands, outlaw bands, mercenaries, pietist communities that close around one like a Venus's-flytrap, Army Induction Centers, plague zones, technophile citadels! I was even two and a half weeks early and managed to arrive with the manuscript of a new novel in my knapsack, penned on the sailship in between working my passage, all ready for bartering to "Monk" Lewiston, head of Solaris Press of Little New York.

The new novel is called *The Aldebaran Experience* and is about a starship journey from the Luna Colony through metaspace to an alien planet orbiting Aldebaran. It is, though I say it myself, an ambitious exercise in what the critic Suvin once called "cognitive estrangement" — but one can't really convey the breadth of the book in a couple of lines; besides, here isn't the place — though I did appear on a foreign writers' panel to discuss my own by now well-known earlier novel *The Film-Maker's Guide to Alien Actors* (Neogollancz Press, Edinburgh) dating from only four years ago. (Ah, the speed of publication and distribution in our SF world!)

On this panel, along with me, were the Frenchman Henri Guillaume, whose tale of mighty computerized bureaucracy and subjective time distortions, *The Ides of Venus*, is still winning acclaim for its originality — a definite step beyond the Old French Masters, Curval and Jeury; and the Mexican Gabriel Somosa — an exciting encounter; and my fellow islander Jeremy Symons, whom I last met in the flesh at our biennial thrash Gypsycon '77 all the way in Devon — his *The Artificial Man* has been a hot contender for this year's Hugo award ever since the nominations started trickling along the trade routes and over the ocean two years ago.

But I should describe the highlights of this wonderful get-together under cloth in New Boston. Frankly, that

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panel was rather ho-hum. Poor Jeremy had come down with some allergy working in the bilges, which affected his throat, and his voice would hardly carry to the back of the marquee....

Highlights, then: *The Film.* Yes, indeed, as advertised in the flyer a year ago, a film had been found! And what a film. Craftsmen built a hand-cranked projector whose light source was the sun itself, focused by an ingenious system of lenses and mirrors from outside the marquee; and six times during the Boskon week we stared, enthralled, at the flickerings of an original print of *Silent Running,* praying that rainclouds would not dim the light too much. Let me not hear any sarcasm about the appropriateness of the title, since no way could anyone activate a soundtrack. We were all enchanted.

The Auction: oh, this was an experience. There was an Ace Double on sale! And an original SF Book Club edition of a Larry Niven collection. *And,* yellow and brittle with age, issues 250 to 260 inclusive of *Locus.* As well as much interesting and historic stuff from our own early post-Collapse era, such as a copy of a handwritten scroll novel (from just before we got hand presses cranking again) by the great Tessa Brien — part of her Jacthar series. The copies of *Locus* went in exchange for a fine Pinto pony — the Alabaman who bid his mount for them was quite happy to walk all the way home. But the Ace Double (Phil Dick's *Dr. Futurity* backed by *The Untelesported Man)* went for a slim bar of gold.

Then there was the Solaris Press party where Henri Guillaume, high on Boston applejack, attempted to dance the can-can, endearing himself to everyone — a few quick sketches were "snapped" of this; and there was even a watercolor for barter by the next morning.

And *The Banquet,* of spiced rabbit stew, followed by ... *The Hugo Awards:* the carved beechwood rocketships for the best work in our field over the three years '75 to '78. First, for the best fanzine, scooped by Alice Turtle's *Call of the Wild* from New Chicago; then for the best story in either of the bi-annual magazines *Jupiter* or *Fantasy,* won by Harmony Friedlander for her moving "Touchdown" in *Jupiter* four years ago; and finally the long-awaited novel Hugo, going to Boskon's Guest of Honor, Jerry Meltzer (as expected, by everyone except Jeremy Symons!), for his cosmos-spanning *Whither, Starman?*

But I think it is Jerry Meltzer's Guest of Honor speech that I shall most treasure the memory of. The speech was entitled, "Some Things Do Not Pass." From the very beginning of it I was riveted, reinvigorated, and felt my life reaffirmed.

Jerry is pushing sixty now, which is quite a miracle now that the average life-expectancy is down to forty or so. He has lost an ear to frostbite and wears a coonskin cap at all times to

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cover his mutilation. He's a raftsman on the Missouri.

Surveying the marquee full of four hundred faces, he smiled — wisely, confidently. He spoke slowly.

"Some things do not pass. Some things *increase* in truth and beauty. Science Fiction is one of these. I say this because Science Fiction is a fiction: it is a *making*, a forging of the legends of our tribe, and the best legends of all humanity. Now that *research* and *probing* have ceased" — he grinned dismissively — "we can indeed freshly and freely invent our science and our worlds. SF was always being spoilt, having her hands tied and the whip cracked over her head by scientific *facts*. They're gone now — most of those blessed facts, about quarks and quasars and I don't know what! — and there won't be any more! It's all mythology now, friends. SF has come into her own, and we who are here today, we know this. Friends, we're Homers and Lucians once again — because science is a myth, and we're its mythmakers. Mars is ours again, and Saturn is, and Alpha C — and lovely Luna. We can read the Grand Masters of yore in a light that the poor folk of the Late Twentieth could never read them in! I say to you, Some Things Do Not Pass. Their loveliness increases. Now we can make that mythic loveliness wilder and headier and more fabulous than ever. This is the true meaning of my *Whither, Starman?!*"

He spoke till the Con Committee lit the whale-oil flambeaux in the tent, and then he talked some more. At the end he was chaired shoulder-high out into the meadow underneath the stars. And just then, what must have been one of the very last dead satellites from the old days streaked across the sky like a comet tail, burning up as it plunged towards the Atlantic to drown fathoms deep. Maybe it was only an ordinary shooting star — but I don't think so. Nor did anyone else. Four hundred voices cheered its downfall, as Jerry threw back his head and laughed.

With a gesture he quietened the crowd. "My friends," he called out, "we really own the stars now. We really do. Never would have done, the other way. Dead suns, dead worlds the lot of them, I shouldn't be surprised — dead universe. Now Sirius is ours. Canopus is. The dense suns of the Hub are all ours. All." His hands grasped at the sky. It gripped the Milky Way, and we cheered again.

Two mornings later, after many perhaps overconfident goodbyes — "See you in '83!" — I walked down into New Boston to the harbor along with my compadre Jeremy — who was somewhat hung over and weaved about at times — to take ship next week or the week after for Liverpool. I wouldn't need to work my passage back, though. I'd bartered *The Aldebaran Experience* to "Monk" Lewiston for a bundle of furs, much in demand in our cold island.

(to page 96)

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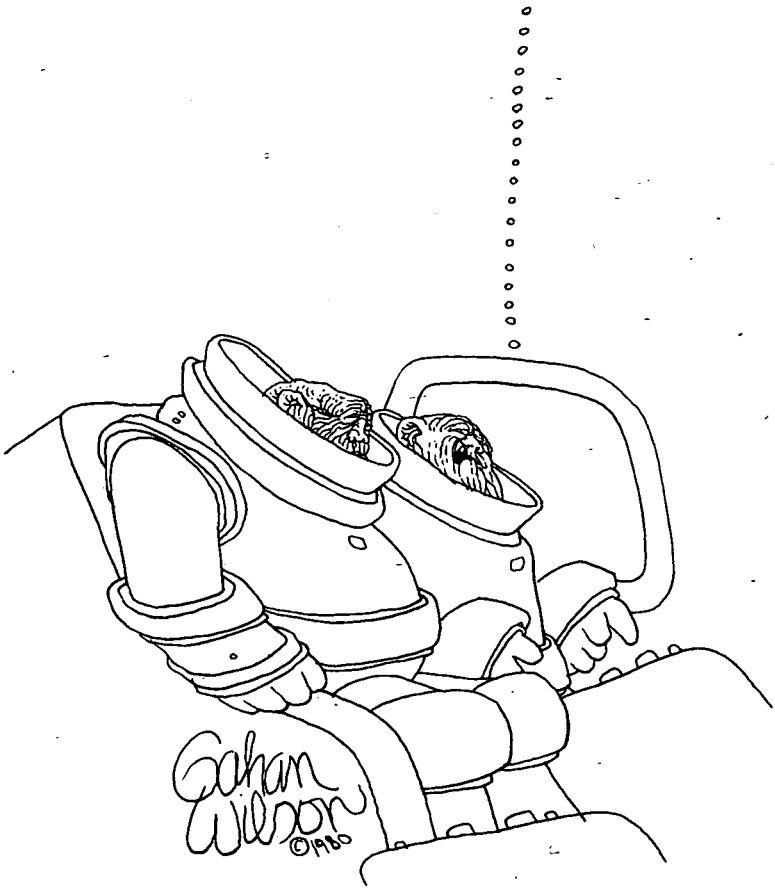

"Well, it won't be long now!"

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Richard Cowper ("The Web of the Magi," June 1980) returns with a fascinating report about an investigation of "certain curious and possibly psychic phenomena" in a house on the outskirts of the little market town of Attleborough.

The Attleborough Poltergeist

BY

RICHARD COWPER

O God! O God! that it were possible
To undo things done; to call back yesterday...

—Thomas Heywood

My father belonged to that small but distinguished band of scientific journalists who flourished during the '20s and '30s and who today seem to have become an almost totally extinct species. Yet the fact that they played a very real part in helping to shape our present world is surely indisputable. Many a distinguished doctor must have caught the virus of enthusiasm from Paul de Kruif's *Microbe Hunters* or *Men against Death*, and I daresay that more than one professor could be found who is prepared to admit that his youthful imagination was set free through the pages of my father's *Pioneers of Physics*.

My father's *forte* was human interest. This is not to say that his scientific facts were inaccurate but rather that he preferred the actors in his dramas to be recognizable as human beings. He wished his reader to *see* the tense faces peering down into that cloud chamber in the Cavendish Laboratory; and when Henri Becquerel's hand hovered before alighting by pure chance on the lump of uranium nitrate which would lead him on to the discovery of radioactivity, my father' aim was to make sure that his reader's hand hovered with it. If in order to achieve this desired objective he sometimes felt it necessary to animate the dead bones of scientific fact with a little *élan vital* supplied from his own lively imagination, then he did so with grace and without qualms. I suspect the truth is that he was a novelist *manqué*.

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When, early in 1944, he was cajoled out of semi-retirement by a publisher's commission to write *The Life of Sir James Cameron Hartson* for the *Great Men of British Science* series, he set about it in his usual well-organized way. He traveled around the country, sometimes alone, sometimes with my mother, interviewing people who had known Hartson and visiting places where the Grand Old Man had lived and worked.

I was stationed in Burma when this was going on, about as far removed in space and time from 19th century Cambridge as it was possible to get, and the occasional letters I received from my father in which he spoke of his research seemed almost like spirit messages from another world. I recall one in which he mentioned having just returned from a trip to blitzed Norwich to consult the Victorian records of the East Anglian Dialectical Society. I read his letter stretched out on a rusty jetty in Rangamati. The temperature was hovering around 102 degrees, and about a yard from my ear, my companion Bill Cassidy was diverting himself by trying to sink floating beer cans with bursts from a sten gun.

A fortnight or so later my squadron was transferred to Austrialia and the mail went haywire. In the next letter I received from my father he spoke regretfully of "not being able to use Martin's Journal after all." I presumed, rightly, that this was a reference to some other letter or letters of his which had gone astray, but it was not until many years after the war was over that I learnt the full story of what must have been contained in that missing correspondence.

The answer lay in a file bearing a label "Attleborough Investigation," which I came across when I was clearing up the house after my mother's death. It contained material which my father had assembled while he was working on what was to be his last book. There were a number of notes and the bulk of what I at first took to be a draft chapter but which I am now inclined to suspect he may have intended to publish separately as a sort of extended footnote to his biography. The story it contained struck me as being so odd and so redolent of its period that I make no apologies for offering it here more or less in the form in which I myself first read it. The narrator is, of course, my father.

I first stumbled across a reference linking James Hartson with Attleborough in the privately circulated *Annual Report of the East Anglian Dialectical Society* — 1892. The E.A.D.S. was one of a number of provincial offshoots from the prestigious Society for Psychical Research, which had been founded under the presidency of Henry Sidgwick ten years before.

Hartson had already carried out a number of investigations on behalf of the S.P.R. (chiefly exposures of fraudulent spiritualist mediums and

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the like) and was apparently engaged by the E.A.D.S. at the suggestion of no less a luminary than the great F.H. Myers. I confess I have been able to find no mention of this either in Myers' own voluminous correspondence or in the Sidgwick archives, but since Dr. Philip Daniels — the moving spirit behind the E.A.D.S. — was a Cambridge contemporary and personal friend of both Myers and Gurney, it seems perfectly likely that he would have appealed to them for advice and that they would have suggested young Hartson as being the best person for the job.

The passage in the *Report* concerned a meeting of the Society which had been held in Daniel's house in Norwich on August 23rd, 1892. Six members had been present, and during the course of the evening a letter from a Dr. George Martin had been read out drawing the attention of the Society to "certain curious and possibly psychic phenomena" which, he believed, were manifesting themselves in a house on the outskirts of the little market town of Attleborough in Norfolk. Dr. Martin had been consulted by two of his patients, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Fletcher, a local bank manager and his wife, who were worried about the health of their niece Alice Hobson, to whom, since the recent untimely deaths of her own mother and father, they had been standing *in loco parentis*.

Having listened to their story with some scepticism Dr. Martin had finally agreed to call round at "Laurel House", Chillingford Rd., after evening surgery and there to examine their ward in Mrs. Fletcher's presence. This he had done and had discovered Alice Hobson to be a "personable" (i.e., physically attractive) and intelligent young lady of seventeen who had smilingly assured him that she believed her aunt and uncle were making a great deal of fuss about nothing.

In deference to Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher's wishes Martin had carried out a routine examination which revealed two minor physical abnormalities—an average pulse rate of 48 and a bodily temperature of 96°F.

He then questioned the girl about the incidents which had been the direct cause of her guardians' consulting him, only to be assured by Miss Hobson that she had no personal recollection whatsoever of the "fainting spells" he referred to, though she was seemingly prepared to accept that they had occurred. So far as he was able to ascertain, there was no family history of *petit mal*, and he had already decided in his own mind that the problem was one of "female periodicity" and was noting as much on his jotting pad when, in his own words, "an incident occurred for which I can find no rational explanation whatsoever".

The consultation was taking place in the Fletchers' dining room. Martin and Miss Hobson were seated upon plain chairs, about a yard apart, directly facing one another. Mrs.

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Fletcher was sitting at the opposite side of the dining table, which had no covering and upon which Martin had placed his medical bag. At the far end of the room stood a massive mahogany sideboard, upon which was displayed an array of silver plate and a "tantalus" — three cut-glass spirit decanters locked inside a specially designed, "servant-proof," wood and metal holder. Without sound or warning this unlikely object rose from its place on the sideboard and dashed itself with considerable force and a deafening clatter against the wall directly to Martin's right.

To Martin it was inconceivable that either Miss Hobson or Mrs. Fletcher could have contrived to fling it since both were still seated in their chairs well out of reach of the sideboard, and neither Mr. Fletcher nor either of the house servants was in the room. Indeed, both the women had appeared at least as startled as Martin himself; Mrs. Fletcher had screamed loudly and Miss Hobson had flung up her arms to protect her head. Martin leapt to his feet, rushed across to where the tantalus was lying and picked it up. As he touched it, he experienced what he described in his letter as "a distinct though minor Galvanic shock, similar to that accompanying the discharge of a Leyden Jar."

At that point the door had burst open, and Mr. Fletcher had appeared on the threshold demanding to know what was going on. During the course of the ensuing conversation it emerged that this was by no means the first inexplicable occurrence in the Fletcher household. It had not taken Dr. Martin long to divine that in consulting him about the health of their niece the Fletchers had been seeking (albeit unwittingly) some means of sharing the burden of their own ever-increasing anxiety.

Martin had succeeded in eliciting from them various details of alleged "happenings." These appeared to fall into two main categories: (a) *physical* (such as that just described) and (b) *aural* (mostly in the form of an explosive report). One or two had been a combination of both (a) and (b). A curious feature of the (b) type phenomena was that they all appeared to be accompanied by a faint though distinctive *odor* which Mrs. Fletcher had described as being "a bit like smelling salts in the way it makes your nose prickle."

Dr. Martin had had no previous personal experience whatsoever of psychic phenomena and was, indeed, a confessed sceptic in such matters, but he found himself so puzzled and intrigued by the Fletcher case that he had written up his account and posted it off to Dr. Philip Daniels at the Dialectical Society. Daniels, who had met Martin once before at a professional symposium, had been sufficiently impressed by the letter to make the journey from Norwich to Attleborough.

After discussing the case at some

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length, the two men had driven round to Laurel House and spoken with the Fletchers and their niece. Dr. Daniels had examined the tantalus together with various other mundane household objects which, the Fletchers assured him, had also behaved in a similarly unorthodox fashion at various times during the previous month: among them were a silver mustard pot, a pair of brass fire-tongs, and a pewter candlestick. However, nothing untoward occurred during the course of the visit, and it was not until the two men were on the point of taking their leave that Alice Hobson had produced a piece of paper which she had handed shyly to Dr. Daniels and asked him if he could possibly explain to her what it meant.

Daniels unfolded the paper and found himself gazing at an extraordinary jumble of figures, letters, and what looked like cabalistic runes. He peered at it and shook his head. "What on earth is this, Miss Hobson?" he asked curiously. "How did you come by it?"

"I don't really know," she said. "I found it on the writing table in my bedroom."

"Do you recognize the hand?"

She hesitated. "I think it must be my own."

"You mean you have no recollection of having written it?"

"None at all, I assure you. It looks like double-Dutch to me."

"And can you describe the circumstances in which you discovered it?"

"Oh, yes. I had been writing a letter to my cousins in Luton. When I came to assemble the sheets of notepaper, I discovered that lying among them."

"Am I to assume there was no indication that you had broken off your letter at any point and then taken it up again?"

"None," she said.

Daniels handed the paper to his colleague. Martin looked equally baffled. "Is it mathematics?" he asked.

"If it is, it's not like any I have ever come across," said Daniels. "That for instance. What does it look like to you?"

"A heart," said Martin.

"And that?"

Martin held his head on one side. "Heaven knows," he said. "A spider, perhaps? I know it's not my field at all, Daniels, but surely *that* is a square root symbol. And doesn't that sign represent infinity?"

Daniels glanced up at Miss Hobson. "What *is* the symbol for infinity, Miss Hobson?"

"I have no idea," she said. "I didn't even know there was one."

"Do you mind if I keep this paper?"

"Please do," she said. "It means nothing to me."

That evening Dr. Daniels dined with George Martin and his wife. Over the meal the two men discussed the case. "Alice Hobson struck me as being

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an extremely level-headed girl," said Daniels. "Not emotionally disturbed in any way. Wouldn't you agree, Martin?"

Dr. Martin nodded. "Cool as a cucumber."

"There's usually some evidence of incipient hysteria in such cases," said Daniels, and went on to describe an investigation which he had conducted with Dr. Gurney. "It was far from satisfactory," he concluded. "Both Gurney and I were convinced that there *had* been genuine manifestations to start with, but the child in question — a very plain girl—obviously relished the unaccustomed attention she was attracting and decided to manufacture some phenomena on her own account. It was all so amateurish that we detected it immediately, but the result was that we felt constrained to dismiss the whole episode as a hoax."

"If Alice Hobson manufactured that infernal tantalus, then I'm dashed if I can see how she did it," said Martin. "I'd say the thing weighs the better part of ten pounds. Well, you saw the scar on the wall yourself."

"Yet she certainly seems to have manufactured the note."

"What note was that, George?" asked Mrs. Martin.

Dr. Daniels produced the sheet of folded notepaper from his breast pocket and passed it across the table to his hostess while Martin described how it had come into their possession.

Mrs. Martin examined it curiously and then said, "You know, I think this is some sort of coded message, George."

The two men regarded her blankly. Finally Martin said, "What makes you say that, my dear?"

"Did you never play such games at school, George?" she enquired with a smile. "Too wise you are, too wise you be; I see you are too wise for me?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Sarah?"

For answer Mrs. Martin rapidly finger-sketched two capital *Y*'s in the air, followed by the letters *U* and *R*. "I read this as being intended for someone called Heartsun," she said. "That is the figure 4 followed by a picture of a heart and a sun. And it appears to end 'see Heartsun sees'."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Martin. "That thing I thought was a spider! You know, it *could* be a sun, Daniels!"

Dr. Daniels frowned. "Hartson," he murmured. "What an extraordinary coincidence."

"You know someone of that name?"

"Indeed, I do. By repute only, though. James Hartson is a protegé of Gurney's. Devilish clever fellow by all accounts. Senior wrangler, Gordon Fellow, and heaven knows what else." He reached out and took the sheet of paper back from Mrs. Martin. "For Hartson," he repeated. "I say, Martin, do you think we could go back there and have another word with Miss Hobson after dinner?"

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"I don't see why not," said Martin. "Your last train doesn't leave till midnight here."

Daniels smiled. "Oh, I don't think that will be necessary. All I wish to ascertain is whether Miss Hobson has ever heard of James Hartson. It certainly seems unlikely, but one never knows, does one?"

The twilight was already fading when Martin turned his pony trap into the graveled drive of Laurel House. The reins were hitched to the handrail, and the two men mounted the porticoed steps to the front door. They heard the bell pealing in the distant recesses of the house and then the brisk tapping of heels on the tiled floor of the outer hall. The door was opened by a young parlor maid who held aloft a lighted oil lamp. Recognizing Dr. Martin, she smiled and stood back to let them in.

Alice Hobson looked up from the novel which she had been reading aloud to her aunt and favored the visitors with a faint and slightly puzzled smile while Mrs. Fletcher apologized for the fact that her husband was attending a lodge meeting in the town and was not expected back until late.

Dr. Martin countered with his own apology for intruding upon them at such an uncivilized hour and then disclosed the reason for the visit.

It was soon obvious that the name "Hartson" meant nothing at all to either woman, and as Martin was explaining how they had arrived at their interpretation, Alice so forgot herself as to laugh. "But surely it would have been far simpler just to write the name down in plain English, if that is all that was needed?" she said.

"Had you been communicating consciously, Miss Hobson," replied Daniels, "I would certainly agree. But speaking from my personal experience of what we psychic researchers call 'automatic script,' the messages are often couched in the most obscure terms. It is almost as if some invisible censor in the human consciousness were being purposely misled. Puns, *double entendres*, haphazard verbal associations are all brought into play. Anything straightforward is, I can assure you, wholly exceptional."

"Then who is this Hartson?" demanded Alice. "Does any such person exist?"

"Yes. That is to say I do know of a gentleman with that name," said Daniels. "He is an associate of Dr. Gurney and an active member of the Cambridge Psychical Research Society. With your permission, I would very much like to send him the note — or a facsimile of it — on the off chance that he may be able to throw some light upon this matter."

"Pray do so, by all means, Dr. Daniels."

"Then in that case we shall trespass upon your hospitality no longer," said Daniels, bowing his head first to Mrs. Fletcher and then to her niece. "I am

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extremely grateful for your co-operation. Pray do not disturb yourselves, ladies. We can find our own way out."

But Alice Hobson had already risen to her feet and was moving towards the door. Daniels and Martin stood back to let her by and she rustled past them into the passage. They took their leave of Mrs. Fletcher, closed the drawing room door behind them and followed the girl into the hall. As they reached the foot of the stairs, Alice was already opening the glass-paneled door into the outer hall. She had just stepped through the doorway when both men heard a crack like a pistol shot. They saw her half-turn towards them, her face chalk-white in the lamplight, and then she had buckled at the knees and collapsed upon the tiled floor.

Both men rushed towards her. Just as they reached the outer hall, the lamp on the table flared up as though caught by a sudden draught, At the same moment the heavy brass dinner gong which hung suspended in a recess at the foot of the stairs emitted a loud, throbbing *boom!* as if it had been struck with tremendous force by an invisible maul.

"Good God!" cried Martin. "What was that?"

Daniels was already down upon his knees fumbling with the hooks and eyes on the high collar of the girl's dress. He had just succeeded in loosening it when Mrs. Fletcher appeared at the foot of the stairs demanding tremulously to know what was happening.

"Your niece appears to have swooned, ma'am," said Martin.

"She's not hurt, is she?"

"I think not," said Daniels. "It seems to be a common faint."

As if to confirm his diagnosis, Alice Hobson chose that moment to open her eyes. She blinked up into the tense faces of the two men and then frowned. Martin placed an arm around her shoulders and helped her up into a sitting position. "Are you all right, Miss Hobson?" he enquired anxiously.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"I really don't know," he said. "We both heard a sound like a pistol going off and then you fell to the floor. For a nasty moment I thought that you must have been shot."

She shivered violently, then scrambled to her feet. "I'm certain you are mistaken, Doctor," she said. "I assure you I heard no such sound."

The two men exchanged glances but refrained from comment.

Martin turned to Mrs. Fletcher. "See she gets a tot of brandy in hot milk, ma'am, then trundle her off to bed. I'll drop by in the morning and see how she is."

"Oh, please don't trouble yourself on my account, Dr. Martin," said Alice with genuine concern in her voice. "I'm perfectly all right. Really, I am."

"I'm sure you are," agreed Martin with professional heartiness. "My visit will be purely for my own private and personal satisfaction."

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Alice smiled palely, moved across to the front door and opened it. "Good night, Dr. Daniels," she said. "Good night, Dr. Martin. I'm so sorry to have been a nuisance."

"No trouble at all, dear young lady," they assured her gallantly and stepped out into the soft summer night.

As they were driving along the Chillingford Rd. towards the railway station, Daniels suddenly slapped his hand across his knee. "'Ozone!" he exclaimed. "That's it, Martin! I've been trying to place it for the past ten minutes. Didn't you recognize it?"

"Now you come to mention it, yes, I believe I did. In the hall. Do you think it significant?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you said in your letter that Mrs. Fletcher had mentioned a smell which made her nose prick. What's that if it's not ozone?"

"You mean there's some sort of physical connection?"

"Electrical, I suspect. You know, Martin, this case really is beginning to interest me profoundly. I shall certainly lose no time in contacting Myers and seeking his advice."

"You don't think there's any real danger, do you, Daniels? From the girl's standpoint, I mean?"

"Well, I suppose there's always a risk that she might have one of those fainting fits at the top of the stairs and tumble down. However, I think it unlikely. Haven't you noticed how women usually contrive to have a syncope in reasonably comfortable circumstances?"

"Good Lord! You mean you think she was *acting*?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Martin. I'm sure it was a perfectly genuine faint. But the unconscious mind cannot be regarded as totally irresponsible. One might almost say that it appears to have its owner's basic interests at heart at all times."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that I suspect Miss Hobson's unconscious mind is trying to cope with some external psychic pressure in the only way it can. That is to say, by preserving her life in spite of herself."

"You mean you really believe there *is* some ulterior force at work?"

"Well, something certainly flung that tantalus across the room, and something struck that gong tonight. And we both know it wasn't Miss Hobson."

"Then what was it, Daniels?"

"I wish I knew."

"Does *anyone* know?"

"Myers and Gurney would maintain that they're getting close to an explanation."

"And Hartson?"

"Ah, Hartson...well, we shall see."

Martin flicked his whip over the pony's flanks. The *clip-clop* of hooves quickened briskly on the macadam as they bowled along into Attleborough. "I'm dashed if I know what to make of any of it, Daniels. This sort of thing is right outside my experience. I don't mind telling you that if you hadn't

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been there tonight I think I'd have been scared out of my wits."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of in that," Daniels assured him. "It's a perfectly natural reaction. Man has always been afraid of what he does not understand."

"Then you believe there *is* a rational explanation?"

"Oh, undoubtedly there is, though I suspect it may mean we'll have to expand the boundaries of orthodoxy before we can accommodate it. I take it you haven't read Myers' *Phantasms of the Living?*"

"No, I can't say I have."

"How about James's *Principles of Psychology?*"

"I've heard of it," said Martin guardedly.

Daniels turned urgently to face him. "I tell you, Martin, there's no doubt at all in my mind that today we're standing right on the brink of something absolutely stupendous! The Dark Ages are finally coming to an end! I'm convinced that the next ten years will see the emergence of a whole new scientific and spiritual synthesis — an utterly overwhelming philosophic concept of man's true nature. You and I will both live to see F.H. Myers recognized as the Charles Darwin of the human psyche!"

Martin said nothing, not because he was unimpressed but simply because he could not think of anything to say that seemed even remotely relevant.

* * *

Ten days later Dr. Martin called in at Laurel House at the end of his morning rounds. He found Mrs. Fletcher and her niece reclining in deck chairs on the croquet lawn. After politely refusing a glass of lemonade and having ascertained that there had been no recurrence of the fainting spells, Martin came straight to the point. "This morning I received a communication from Dr. Daniels. He tells me he had heard from his Cambridge friends who have expressed great interest in your problem. Daniels has asked me to find out if you would agree to Mr. James Hartson carrying out an investigation under the auspices of the Society for Psychical Research."

Alice Hobson tilted her head to one side and regarded him through her lowered eyelashes. "Mr. Hartson would conduct this investigation in person?"

"So Daniels has given me to understand."

"And what would such an investigation amount to, do you suppose?"

"To tell the truth, I've no idea, Miss Hobson. It's all *terra incognita,* so far as I'm concerned. However, I have the greatest confidence in Daniels' judgment, and he in Dr. Gurney's."

"And Dr. Gurney in Mr. Hartson's?" inquired the girl with a smile.

"So it would appear."

"And how long do you suppose it would take?" asked Mrs. Fletcher.

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"Daniels mentions a period of three or four days," said Martin. "It goes without saying that Mrs. Martin and I will be delighted to offer Mr. Hartson hospitality while he—"

"Oh, no," said Alice quickly. "He will stay here with us, won't he, Aunt?"

"Whatever Dr. Martin thinks best, dear."

Martin pursed up his lips and nodded sagely. "It probably *would* be more convenient if he were residing on the premises," he said. "Otherwise, I can well imagine vital minutes being lost while your servant ran round to us with a message for him."

"Exactly," said Alice firmly. "Mr. Hartson shall stay here as our guest, and you, Dr. Martin, will write to Dr. Daniels and tell him so."

"Really, Alice!" protested Mrs. Fletcher. "Whatever next? Do forgive her, Dr. Martin."

Martin smiled tolerantly. "As a matter of fact, Daniels *has* asked me to telegraph direct to Cambridge if you should agree to the proposition. It appears that both Gurney and Hartson view it as a matter of some considerable urgency. As soon as he receives word from us, Hartson undertakes to be in Attleborough within forty-eight hours."

"Really?" said Mrs. Fletcher. "As soon as that? Then I had better go and have a word with cook at once. Oh, dear, you don't suppose Mr. Hartson is a vegetarian, do you?"

She got up from her chair, proffered Dr. Martin a faintly abstracted smile and disappeared in the house.

Martin was on the point of taking his leave when Alice Hobson laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Did Dr. Daniels say whether he had sent that message to Cambridge?"

"Not specifically," said Martin. "But I assume he must have done. Why! Has there been another?"

She appeared to hesitate; then, almost reluctantly, she nodded.

"And have you managed to decipher it?"

"No", she said, shaking her head. "Well, only those same two signs. I found them scribbled on the flyleaf of a book I'd been reading."

"And that's all there was?"

"There were some other things," she said vaguely. "Some numbers, and so forth. Nothing that made any sense."

"So far as I'm concerned, Miss Alice, none of it makes any sense," he asserted roundly. "But I'm confident we'll get to the bottom of it sooner or later."

"Yes," she said, smiling her private little smile. "I'm sure we will. Sooner or later."

Two days later, in the steely heat of midafternoon, Dr. Martin drove to Attleborough station to meet James Hartson off the Cambridge train. He found a tall, gangling man in his middle twen-

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ties who was perspiring freely in an unseasonable suit of heather-mixture tweeds and wearing a cap that did not quite match. He thrust this to the back of his head as he shook the doctor's hand. Martin noted the luxuriant black mustache, the large, humorous brown eyes, and was impressed by the firm hand clasp. "You look as if you've come prepared for a longish stay, sir," he observed, indicating two substantial, strapped leather suitcases and a portmanteau which a porter was already wheeling towards the station exit.

"Eh?" said Hartson. "Oh, those. Well, that's mostly photographic and electrical apparatus, y'know."

"Indeed?" said Martin. "I had no idea that psychic research was such a scientific business."

Hartson smiled and said "Yes?" in a vague sort of way.

"I suppose I was expecting — well, a planchette or somesuch." Martin had been about to add the word "nonsense" but, tactfully, deleted it.

Hartson nodded. "Ah," he said. "Most people do, y'know."

While Martin superintended the loading of the luggage into the trap, Hartson tipped the porter and clambered aboard. He hauled an oil-skin tobacco pouch from one pocket and a pipe from the other and began to fill it. As Martin took his place beside him, he said, "We gather from Pip Daniels that you witnessed some of these manifestations yourself, Doctor. Would you care to tell me about it?"

Martin proceeded to relate the episode of the tantalus.

When he had concluded, Hartson struck a match and puffed voluminous clouds of blue smoke into the sunny air. "And how (puff, puff) did Miss Hobson (puff, puff) react to that?"

"Very prudently in the circumstances," replied Martin with a grin. "She ducked."

The spent match was blown out and flipped onto the roadway. "She didn't faint or anything, then?"

"No," said Martin. "To tell the truth, she seemed to take it all very much in her stride."

"And that didn't strike you as odd?"

"Certainly not at the time," said Martin. "But I don't mind telling you, sir, I was pretty startled myself when it happened. I mean to say I'd never seen anything like it in my life. That wretched thing could easily have brained somebody."

"They never do, y'know," said Hartson. "Can't recall a verified case on record of a direct fatality from a poltergeist."

"Really?" said Martin. "I didn't know that."

"There's been the odd fire, y'know — usually started by a hot coal or suchlike." He broke off, frowning. "I say. That's deuced odd."

"What's that?"

"Am I right in thinking there's a bridge down that road?" Hartson

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pointed ahead with his pipestem. "Three arches? Red brick?"

"Why, yes," said Martin. "Chillingford Bridge. You know it, do you?"

"No," said Hartson. "I've never been here before in my life."

Martin glanced sideways at him. "Perhaps you consulted a map before you set out?"

Hartson shook his head. "Curious," he murmured and lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

It was not until the trap was turning into Chillingford Rd. and scarcely more than a few hundred yards was separating them from the gate to Laurel House that Dr. Martin thought to ask the young man if he had seen the mysterious "message."

Hartson admitted that he had.

"And were you able to make anything of it?"

The young man nodded.

"Do you mind my asking you what it was?"

"Not at all. The 'message,' as you call it, was an abstract philosophical concept expressed in quasi-mathematical terms."

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed Martin. "I must say you astonish me! I'd never seen anything like it in my life."

"I'm not altogether surprised," said Hartson, glancing at his companion with a flicker of a smile. "The only reason *I* recognized it was that I happen to have originated the thing myself."

"Originated it yourself!"

"Well, something remarkably like it, y'know."

Martin reined the pony in to a rearing halt and turned to face the young man. "Then, if you don't mind my asking, sir, how in the devil's name did Miss Hobson....?"

"How indeed?" echoed Hartson. "So far as I'm aware, Dr. Martin, not more than four people in the world were privy to that formula. Scarcely a dozen at the outside would even have recognized the symbolism. And Miss Hobson is certainly not among them."

"But what an extraordinary thing!" said Martin.

Hartson nodded. "To be perfectly frank, that's the chief reason I'm here today. So you won't mind if I ask you to treat what I've just told you as a confidence, will you? Just for the time being, y'know. Mum's the word, eh?"

"Of course, of course," said Martin. "I promise I won't breathe a word. But what an extraordinary thing, eh?"

Hartson prodded thoughtfully at his mustache with his pipestem and smiled enigmatically.

"She's found another since then," said Martin, suddenly remembering it. "She told me so herself the other day. Just before I sent you that wire."

"Is that so?"

"She said she'd found it scribbled on the flyleaf of a book. Mind you, I haven't seen it myself."

"Was it the same sort of thing, d'ye know?"

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"That's what I gathered. Numbers and so forth, she said."

"Fascinating," murmured Hartson. "Absolutely fascinating."

Martin shook the reins, the rubber-tired wheels of the trap rolled forward once more, and two minutes later were crunching over the gravel on the Fletcher's driveway.

As they drew up before the front door, Mrs. Fletcher and her niece emerged from the house and came down the steps to greet their visitors. Dr. Martin effected the introductions. Hartson pulled off his cap and shook hands, expressing himself delighted to make their acquaintance. He retained Miss Hobson's hand for perhaps a fraction longer than was compatible with strict etiquette, and Martin saw the girl lower her eyes as a faint touch of color rose on her cheeks. Next moment, the gardener/houseboy appeared and Hartson had turned away to supervise the unloading of his baggage.

Dr. Martin was prevailed upon to stay to tea. By then Mr. Fletcher had returned from his bank, and the five of them deployed themselves on deck chairs outside the summer house while Mrs. Fletcher presided over the tea pot and the maid handed round plates of paper-thin sandwiches. Hartson chatted amiably about the work of the Society and described one or two of the cases he had been engaged upon with Dr. Gurney. "Our chief problem remains the extraordinary persistence of irrational credulity," he concluded. "People continue to clamor for evidence of the supernatural, whereas the whole aim and object of the S.P.R. has been to extend the spectrum of human perception while working within strictly ordained scientific limits."

"Then you do not believe in ghosts, Mr. Hartson?" enquired Alice.

Hartson smiled. "No, Miss Alice, I do *not* believe in ghosts. Nevertheless, I have overwhelming evidence that a vast number of people *do* believe in them."

"But isn't a poltergeist a kind of ghost?" she persisted.

"If by 'ghost' you mean an unbridled eruption of psychic energy, then, yes, you are perfectly correct. I had supposed you were referring to a type of apparition which is popularly reputed to haunt churchyards, y'know, or wander through ruined castles, moaning dismally and wringing its sepulchral hands."

When the laughter had subsided Martin asked curiously: "But what *is* this 'psychic energy'?"

"As yet we do not know," said Hartson, turning to face him. "All I can tell you, Dr. Martin, is that in our limited experience it appears to be intimately associated with certain" — he paused and Martin sensed the word "immature" hovering inaudibly in the air between them — "certain human personalities at a particular stage of their psychological and physical development. There have been numerous attempts to account for it; none, to my

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mind, wholly convincing."

"Then tell us what *you* think, Mr. Hartson," said Alice.

Hartson set down his cup and saucer on the lawn beside him and wiped his mustache with a crumpled linen handkerchief. "That is no easy question, Miss Alice," he said, "but perhaps I can offer you some sort of meaningful analogy. Let me ask you to try to imagine the human personality as a kind of lens, but a lens with the peculiar property of concentrating the multiplicity of invisible vibrations which permeate the ether. Now I believe that by flexing this lens it is perhaps possible to focus forces — forces of which we as yet know little or nothing — in such a way that they are able to exert pressures upon the physical world about us — perhaps even to the extent of temporarily neutralizing the enormous forces of gravity and distorting the spatial and temporal matrix." He noticed the increasingly blank look on her face and smiled apologetically. "I fear you are very little the wiser."

"Not a scrap," she laughed. "But thank you just the same."

"Gravity I think I might just accept," said Martin. "After all I saw what happened to that infernal tantalus. But space and time — they're something else again. Are you really contending that they are *not* immutable?"

"Within the narrow band of everyday sensory perception, certainly they are," agreed Hartson. "We order our lives on that assumption y'know. But we are like horses in blinkers, Doctor. We see only what is straight ahead of us. The psychic operates on the remote outer fringes of our sensory awareness, and who knows what strange laws may hold sway there?"

"More things in heaven and earth, eh, Mr. Hartson?" chuckled Mr. Fletcher with the self-satisfied air of a man who has summed it all up in a phrase.

Hartson smiled politely and then, turning to Alice, said, "I wonder if I might prevail upon you for a little assistance in setting up some of my apparatus, Miss Alice?"

"Why, yes, I'd love to," she said eagerly. "What do you want me to do?"

"That will be easier to demonstrate than to explain," he said. "Would you please excuse us, ma'am?"

He rose to his feet, shook Dr. Martin by the hand, nodded to Mr. Fletcher and strode off towards the house with Alice trotting at his side.

"What a charming young man," Mrs. Fletcher remarked to the tea pot.

Dr. Martin had been vaguely toying with the notion of dropping in on the Fletcher household the following afternoon just to see how matters were progressing, but his plans were frustrated almost before they were engendered by an emergency summons to a woman on an outlying farm who

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had gone into premature labor. It was after six o'clock when he returned to Attleborough to find awaiting him a hastily scrawled note in an unfamiliar hand:

Dear Martin, Could you possibly manage to drop by this evening after dinner? Most anxious to discuss some aspects of this case which I feel you may be able to shed light on. Yrs, J.C.H.

"When did this arrive?" he asked his wife.

"The Fletcher's gardener brought it round soon after you'd left," she said. "I told him to tell Mr. Hartson that you were out on a call, but that I'd see you got it as soon as you returned."

"Well, I'm dashed if I can see what light he's hoping I'll be able to shed," grumbled Martin. "I'm just a common or garden G.P. not a damned witch-doctor."

"Then you're not going?"

"I'll see how I feel after dinner," he said and trudged off up the stairs to take a well-earned bath.

By nine thirty that evening Martin's spirits and his curiosity had both revived sufficiently for him to feel able to announce to his wife that he had decided to stroll up to Laurel House after all.

"Then be sure to take your umbrella with you," she cautioned. "The glass has been dropping like a stone ever since tea."

Martin kissed her, told her not to wait up for him, and, having lit a cigar, set off on foot for the Fletcher's house, which lay about half a mile distant from his own.

In ominous contrast to the cloudless atmosphere which had prevailed for the previous fortnight, the sky was now heavily overcast; the air warm, exhausted and oppressive; and Martin guessed his wife had been right in prophesying a storm. He became aware of an uneasy, gnawing sense of apprehension which seemed to be localized in the region of his solar plexus, but, such was his nature, he had no sooner acknowledged it than he dismissed it as indigestion and continued resolutely on his way. Having reached the gates of Laurel House, he strode purposefully up the drive to the front door and rang the bell.

The door was opened by Mrs. Fletcher in person. She seemed pleased to see him and explained that it was the maid's evening off. "You are just in time for some coffee, Dr. Martin," she said. "Robert and Alice are in the drawing room with James. He is busy setting up some more of his mysterious electrical apparatus."

Martin hung his hat and ulster on the hall stand, dropped his umbrella into the receptacle and followed his hostess down the passage. "I'll wager we're in for a storm," he said. "It's devilish close out."

"Oh, I do hope not," she said nervously. "Thunder always gives me a headache."

She led the way into the lamplit drawing room, and Martin exchanged

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greetings with the others. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, gazing about him. "You've got a regular laboratory here. What are you hoping to discover with all this stuff?"

"Any significant variation in the electrical field," said Hartson, glancing up from his apparatus. "This thing's reputed to be sensitive to a millionth of an ampère. That one" — pointing to a gold-leaf electroscope —" registers the atmosphere potential." He struck a match and touched it to the wick of a little oil lamp which had for a shade a slotted metal tube. Having adjusted the flame to his satisfaction, he maneuvered the lamp around in front of a large, clamped lens. This in its turn was standing before an instrument which Martin was delighted to recognize as a galvanometer. As Hartson extended his free hand above a complex cobweb of thin copper wires, a dim spot of reflected light began to creep along a calibrated scale which was positioned some five or six feet away upon a bureau.

Martin accepted the cup of coffee which Mrs. Fletcher handed him, stirred it abstractedly for a while, then wandered across to where Alice was sitting on the sofa. A faint smile was hovering about her lips as she surveyed Hartson's activities.

"A penny for them, miss."

She glanced up at him and her smile broadened. "Do *you* know what atmospheric potential is, Dr. Martin?"

Martin bent down until his lips were close to her ear and whispered, "I'm sure I have even less idea than you have my dear," and he laid his finger to his lips.

Hartson, his arrangements completed, now came over to Alice and invited her to take up a position seated before the table. When she had done so, he laid before her a sheaf of notepaper and a pencil. As she reached for a pencil, he produced a second sheaf which he laid on the table about eighteen inches away from the first.

Martin moved a pace closer and observed the girl curiously. He saw her pick up the pencil in her right hand and then transfer it to her left. Hartson nodded approvingly, handed her a second pencil, and then adjusted the positions of the two piles of paper. When they were arranged to his satisfaction, he sat down opposite her, produced a large sheet of white pasteboard and a stick of charcoal from beneath the table and rapidly scrawled a long line of symbols across the top of the board. "I just want you to copy these, Alice," he said. "It doesn't matter in the least if your copy isn't strictly accurate. Just scribble away."

Alice frowned, stared hard at the board before her and then began tentatively marking her left-hand page. As he watched her, Martin became conscious of a prickling tension in the skin at the back of his neck. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mrs. Fletcher lean across, murmur something to her husband, and then sit back and gather

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her crocheted shawl about her shoulders.

Returning his attention to the table, the doctor was astonished to observe that Alice now appeared to be writing with both hands at the same time, even though her attention was seemingly wholly concentrated upon the pad to her left. He craned forward in an attempt to peer over her shoulder, only for Hartson to reprove him with a frown and a shake of the head. In the act of drawing back, Martin noticed that the faint spot of light was beginning to edge its way slowly across the calibrated scale on the bureau. As he stared at it he saw it suddenly leap sideways and vanish. A moment later there was a brilliant, flickering flash across the window curtains, followed, almost instantaneously, by an earsplitting crash.

With a squeal of terror Mrs. Fletcher leapt from her chair and flung herself into her husband's arms. No sooner had she done so than Martin heard a brisk pattering from the direction of the fireplace. He swung round to see a cloud of sooty dust billowing out from behind the tapestry fire screen. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "It looks as if you've lost a chimney pot! I say! What on earth...?"

He advanced a couple of hesitant paces towards the grate, then stood, transfixed by astonishment. Hovering in the throat of the chimney was a ball of what appeared to be bluish-white light.

Martin was later to estimate it as being about the size of a grapefruit and to describe it as "glowing intensely and turning over and over on itself quite slowly, in the most uncanny way, rather like a child's soap bubble." As for his own reaction at the time he assessed that as "being compounded of about equal parts of astonishment, fascination, and the purest craven funk."

After a couple of hesitant seconds the firebubble floated out of the chimney and drifted off towards a set of polished brass fire irons. It dallied above the tongs for perhaps ten seconds, almost as if it were investigating them, then, its curiosity seemingly satisfied, it ascended by way of the wrought-iron stand of the oil lamp towards the reticulation of copper wires that Hartson had erected.

Up to that moment Martin's attention had been so intensely concentrated upon this extraordinary phenomenon that he had almost forgotten that there was anyone else in the room with him. Now, as the fireball's eerie silent passage brought it closer to Hartson and Alice Hobson, they too swam back again into the doctor's vision, and he became conscious that Mrs. Fletcher was whimpering somewhere behind his back.

"Whatever you do, Alice, don't move." Hartson's voice, though vibrant with suppressed excitement, was astonishingly calm, almost, indeed, conversational. "Dr. Martin?

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There's a window immediately behind you. Can you manage to get it open?"

Spurred out of his stupor, Martin backed away towards the heavy velvet drapes and fumbled behind them. As he struggled to release the catch, the night sky was ripped brutally apart by a second lightning flash and the windowpanes rattled like tinfoil. He succeeded in loosening the lock, thrust the lower sash upwards and dragged aside the curtains.

The whole operation had occupied him for perhaps twenty seconds. When he turned back towards the table, he saw that the slowly gyrating bubble was now hovering in the air directly above the wire grid. He saw too that long gossamer strands of Alice Hobson's shoulder-length hair were floating out towards it as though drawn by some invisible magnetic force. The sight filled him with a peculiar horror. "For God's sake, get back, Alice!" he gasped and, lunging forward, caught hold of her by the shoulders.

At the instant of physical contact he experienced a violent electrical jolt in his forearms. So sharp and unexpected was it that instead of dragging the girl towards him as he had intended he half tripped and stumbled against the back of her chair. Her head jerked forward and a single questing strand of her hair touched the fireball. He heard a voice, which he guessed to be Hartson's, shout: "Stop, stop, man!" There was a deafening report, and the next thing Martin knew was that he was lying on the floor in almost total darkness with a smell of singed hair in his nostrils and something warm and soft lying sprawled across him.

As he struggled to free himself, a match flared. Through ears still ringing like bells, he heard Hartson's voice crying: "Alice! Alice, are you all right?"

"Here, man!" he called. "Down here!"

The match went out. Hartson swore violently. Martin heard Mr. Fletcher pleading: "Pull yourself together, Dorothy, for heaven's sake!" and then another tremendous thunderclap obliterated every other sound.

Martin succeeded in disentangling himself from a thicket of invisible chair legs and groped about in the darkness until his hand alighted upon Alice's chest. To his inexpressible relief he felt a faint, bird-like fluttering beneath his fingertips. "Can't you get that lamp lit?" he shouted and, even as he spoke the words, a second match spurted into sudden brightness. By its wavering light Martin contrived to drag the unconscious girl clear of the chair and hauled her backwards to the hearth rug, where he set about loosening her bodice.

Only when Hartson had succeeded in re-lighting one of the oil lamps did the full dramatic effect of the explosion become evident; yet the damage was more apparent than real. Hartson's apparatus, which had been at the epicenter of the explosion, was a total

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shambles, the copper wires melted, twisted and fused into a sort of weird metal bird's nest by the force or nature of the blast. The galvanometer and its screen had been flung to the floor where they lay among a forlorn jumble of photographs, knickknacks and sundry bric-á-brac which had been scooped from their resting places on the tops of bookcases and bureaux and pitched into the general mêlée. Scattered around the four corners of the room were the sheets of notepaper which Martin had last seen lying on the table in front of Alice.

For five tense minutes the girl remained unconscious, though her pulse was steady and her breathing regular and even. When she finally came to her senses, it was exactly as though she were awakening from a profound sleep. Her first act was to indulge in a series of tremendous and unladylike yawns, followed by a vigorous and uninhibited scratching of her arms and bosom. She complained too that her hearing was muffled, but this aftereffect seemed to wear off quite rapidly. Indeed, in retrospect, Martin was inclined to the opinion that, of all the people who had been in the room at the time of the explosion, Alice was possibly the one least shaken by what had happened. He noted too how Mrs. Fletcher made a remarkably swift recovery and set about restoring the room to rights.

Fletcher produced a whisky decanter and a soda siphon and treated the men to stiff drinks, while Alice, at Martin's suggestion, was dosed with a brandy and soda. They all sat round, talking nineteen to the dozen, as they attempted to reconstruct the chain of events from their separate and fragmented recollections, while on the driveway outside the rattle of hailstones gave way to torrential, drumming rain, which in its turn gradually lessened in violence as the storm slowly withdrew towards the east.

It was close on midnight when Dr. Martin rose to leave. By then the rain had stopped completely and stars were already twinkling from a moonless sky. As he said his farewells and stepped out on to the porch, Hartson said, "I feel I could use a breath of fresh air too. Do you mind if I stroll along with you?"

Martin expressed himself delighted to have company, and the two men strode off noisily savoring the cool sweetness of the storm-cleansed air.

When they were well out of earshot of the house, Hartson said, "You got my note then?"

"Oh, yes," said Martin. "You wanted to pick my brains about something or other."

"What I'm really after is some information from you, Doctor. Of a somewhat confidential nature, y'know. I'll quite understand if you feel unable to supply it."

Intrigued, Martin asked, "Does it concern Alice?"

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"Yes," said Hartson. "Did you know that she is a somnambule?"

"No, I didn't. But I confess it doesn't surprise me. How did you discover it?"

Hartson paused. "This must remain absolutely *entre nous*, Martin."

"Of course."

"I found her standing beside my bed in the early hours of this morning."

"Good God! What did you do?"

"To be honest, I was petrified. But at least I had the wit to realize she was walking in her sleep. I took her by the hand, led her out into the corridor, then shot back and bolted my door. I would have escorted her to her own room except that I'd no idea which it was, and, frankly, I was appalled at the thought that her aunt or uncle might discover us."

"She was in her nightdress, I take it."

"Far worse. She was stark naked!"

Martin let out his breath in a long whistle.

"You see my problem?"

"Indeed, I do. But I don't really see what you expect *me* to do about it."

"Then you have had no previous experience of schismatic personality?"

"What the devil's that?"

"When two quite different people seem to inhabit one body. We've come across several striking cases of it in our recent research."

"Ah.. And you think that Alice Hobson is one of them?"

"I don't know. But I thought perhaps you might be able to tell me something about her which would help me to decide how best to handle this situation. Do her aunt and uncle know that she walks in her sleep?"

"It's possible, I suppose. They haven't mentioned it to me though."

"What would you advise me to do?"

"Pack your bags and clear off back to Cambridge first thing tomorrow morning. You've got all the excuse you need, now your equipment's been ruined. Stay on and you may well find your reputation's ruined too. Not to mention hers!"

"You certainly are a thoroughgoing pragmatist, Dr. Martin."

"I've got a fair share of common sense, if that's what you mean."

"You're right, of course," said Hartson. "There's everything to lose by staying and nothing more to gain. It begins to look as if that fireball may have proved a most fortuitous omen. A veritable messenger from the gods, y'know. A pity about the galvanometer, though. Gurney's bound to be livid."

By this time they had come within sight of the doctor's house. A lamp was burning at an upstairs window. "Come on in and have a nightcap," suggested Martin genially.

Five minutes later Hartson was lying back in an armchair in Dr. Martin's study with a tumbler of the doctor's best whisky in his hand. Martin re-

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stoppered the decanter, subsided into the chair opposite his guest, and raised his glass in token salute. "Well, I don't know what conclusions *you've* reached about this business," he said, "but I don't mind telling you it's left me completely baffled. I find it about as mystifying as that book of James's which Daniels lent me. But to you I daresay it's pretty much run-of-the-mill, eh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that," said Hartson. "There are certain similarities between this case and some of our others, but that's all. It's the details which are so fascinatingly different." He set down his glass, reached into his inner pocket and drew out a sheet of paper. Having unfolded it and glanced at it, he passed it across to the doctor. "Tell me what you make of that," he said.

Martin held the paper up to catch the lamplight and read: *stop stop stop cam for the love of god cam stop now i beg*. "What on earth is this?" he asked.

"I'm not absolutely sure," said Hartson, "but I'm pretty certain that's what Alice was writing with her right hand just before the fireball descended. I found it among the sheaf of papers Mrs. Fletcher collected up from the floor."

"But what an extraordinary thing!" said Martin. "What does it mean? Stop what?"

Hartson turned his hands palm-upwards in an expressive gesture of incomprehension. "I have absolutely no idea," he said. "But you see now what I said the details of this case were so extraordinary."

Martin peered at the paper. "What does *cam* stand for? Cambridge?"

"Possibly. But I'm inclined to suspect it represents 'Cameron.' That's my middle name, y'know."

"Does Alice know that?"

"I very much doubt it. It's a sort of private family joke. I used to call myself 'Cam' when I was a baby."

Martin gazed across at him, a faraway look in his eyes, groping to recall something. "Cam," he murmured. "Cam? By Jove, yes! Just before that thing went off, you shouted something, didn't you?"

"Why, no," said Hartson. "It was *you* who shouted."

"Believe me, I did not."

"Well, one of us did."

Their eyes met, curious, doubting. "It *was* a man's voice," said Martin. "I'm sure I'm not mistaken about that. And it wasn't 'man,' it was 'Cam.' 'Stop! Stop, Cam!' We can't *both* have imagined it, can we?"

"Unlikely, certainly," agreed Hartson, "but not wholly impossible."

"Alice couldn't have done it."

"Assuming it *was* a man's voice. No, she couldn't."

"And it *was*. I'm certain of that, Hartson. Indeed, if I hadn't thought it was your voice, I might well have supposed it to be the shout of an elderly man."

Hartson eyed him sharply. "What makes you say that?"

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"The pitch of the cry, I think. High. Almost shrill."

"Y'know, you're right, Martin. You've hit it exactly. It *was* an old man's voice. Curious. How very curious."

Martin stretched out and handed the paper back to him. "Then you don't think this is connected in some way with those other messages?"

"I fail to see how it could be," said Hartson.

"You don't read it as — well, as being a warning of some kind?"

Hartson's eyebrows rose a fraction. "No," he said, and smiled faintly.

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I would."

Hartson regarded the older man speculatively. "A warning?" he repeated. "But a warning against what, Doctor?"

"I've really no idea," said Martin. "Against continuing with your present line of research, perhaps. This — what does James call it? — 'exploration of the metapsychic'."

"Well, in that case," said Hartson with a grin, "I can only say that it's arrived a couple of months too late. The fact is, Martin, I've already engaged myself for a post under J.J. Thomson at the Cavendish in October. I've decided to devote my energies to research in the physical science. Frankly, I'm convinced that the tide is turning in that direction. Between ourselves, y'know, P.R. is proving something of a *cul-de-sac*."

"Allow an ignorant medico to offer you his congratulations," said Martin. "I'm afraid J.J. Thomson's just a name to me. What particular line will you yourself be pursuing?"

"Research into the nature of the fundamental particles," said Hartson, folding up the sheet of notepaper and restoring it to his breast pocket. "A rich enough field of exploration for any ambitious young physicist, wouldn't you say?"

In one sense the story of the "Attleborough Investigation" ends there. Next morning Dr. Martin saw Hartson off at the station, and, so far as is known, the two men never set eyes on each other again. Yet something must have prompted the doctor to write down his personal record of the whole extraordinary episode while it was still fresh in his memory, because the journal containing his account is dated September, 1892. On Martin's death in 1920 this journal, together with other family papers, passed to his elder daughter, who was then living in Shropshire. When my father was commissioned to write his *Life of Sir James Cameron Hartson* in February, 1944, he advertised for biographical information in the usual places and, as a result, received a letter from Martin's daughter which led to his examining the original manuscript.

In view of Martin's own letter to the Dialectical Society the authenticity

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of the document can hardly be doubted, but, as my father was the first to realize, it was not the sort of thing he could make profitable use of in a semi-official biography of one of the world's greatest atomic physicists. As he himself expressed it in a letter: "Ten days before I read the wretched thing, I had been down in Attleborough talking to some of Hartson's team of international stars at the Chillingford Laboratories. Naturally I've no means of knowing for certain whether the old man's workshop now occupies the precise geographical location that was once occupied by Laurel House, but, for what it's worth, my guess is that they must have been pretty well identical. As for the particular line of research Hartson was pursuing at the time of his death, all I could gather was that it was terribly hush-hush. Everyone I attempted to pin down about it was so purposefully vague that I can only assume it has some military significance too appalling for even an informed layman like myself to be allowed to contemplate!" Since Hartson has now emerged as one of the founding fathers of the "Manhattan Project," that guess came a lot closer than my father ever knew.

All that remains is a sort of footnote to a footnote. Among the stray papers which I discovered in the Attleborough file was a single foolscap sheet of handwritten notes headed: *Totally Unscientific Hypothesis.* Dated January, 1945, three months before my father's own death, it reads as follows:

Let us assume:

(a) that directly before his death J.C.H. becomes overwhelmingly conscious of where his life's work has been leading; (b) that this causes him the most intense mental anguish; (c) that for some unknown reason he desires passionately to "undo things done; to call back yesterday;" (d) that, as a young man, he had conceived the human psyche to be in some strange manner capable of distorting the fabric of Nature to the point where even Time and Space could be affected.

What follows from this?

Is it possible to believe that Hartson's "earlier self" was drawn (called?) to the precise point in space where so much of his future anguish was to be generated? And when he arrives — sensing a strange familiarity in a place he has never seen — is it only in order that his "future self" can cry out to him down the echoing corridor of all the distant years to come *stop stop stop cam for the love of god cam stop now i beg?* Was that "old man's voice" his own? That fireball a true "messenger of the gods," engendered in some fierce psychic vortex whose possible existence he himself had once conjectured and then elected to deny?

And what of Alice? Was she no

(to page 96)

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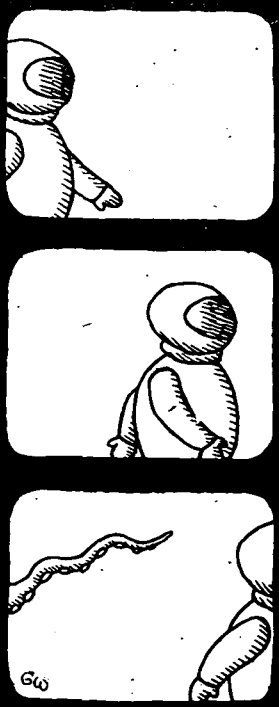
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



TATIONS — INCAN & RECAN

This month we have a brief hiatus between biggies to touch on a motley miscellany of subjects; something old, etc. but, of course, nothing blue.

New *and* borrowed, as a matter of fact, was a really superb version of *The Tempest*, made in England and shown here on the Bardathon that PBS is holding over the next few years.

I must admit to being less than happy about the various Shakespearian productions we had already seen last season and earlier in this one. Obviously meant eventually for schoolrooms, they were done "classically," i.e. the Victorian idea of the Elizabethan idea of whatever period Shakespeare was working in.

But *The Tempest* was something else — really magic, but beautifully understated. The setting in particular was wonderful — cliffs and a promentory of striated rock overlooking a desolate beach. The first view of magically-robed Prospero, staff in hand, quelling the storm from the cliffs, was all a wizard-lover could wish.

That, in fact, describes Michael Hordern's performance entirely; he was a wise, witty, and totally sympathetic enchanter. The two lovers were suitably handsome (she, in particular, had a pre-Raphaelite beauty). The Caliban had just enough of the look of Frankenstein's creation to justify his constantly being called "monster," and

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though I could have done without a certain manic intensity early in the performance, the Ariel had the right inhuman quality, balancing that of Caliban, and appeared and disappeared in and out of thin air very nicely.

There was also a splendid musical number performed by three goddesses and the spirits of the island ("...the isle is full of noises,/Sounds and sweet airs..."), sung and danced in a style of the Renaissance idea of the classical that was almost Botticellian.

In all, director John Gorrie has given us a *Tempest* that is really spellbinding; I hope it's repeated often.

As for something old, I finally, after all these years, caught up with that legendary movie, *The Wicker Man*. For those who have not heard of it, it is a film made in England in 1972 or thereabouts. Rumors kept drifting across the water of its excellence, but until recently, it had nothing in the way of general release in the U.S., and even its recent availability seems to be very spotty.

After that many years of buildup, few films would be anything but a letdown, but so far as I'm concerned, *The Wicker Man* deserves its reputation.

The premise of the film is that the inhabitants of an isolated island off the coast of Scotland return to their ancient pre-Christian religion in order to insure the fertility of their crops. A policeman comes from the mainland to search for an island girl who is supposedly missing. He arrives on May Eve...

Anyone with any knowledge of Celtic mythology can take it from there, but there are still surprises along the way. What I think impressed me most about *The Wicker Man* is its intelligence; the pleasure of the film derives from the interplay between the modernity of the setting and what we know or suspect lies beneath the surface. Even the ceremonies and rituals are what any contemporary British village might do in that direction — the May pole, the jolly masks and costumes, the village brass band (the song played and sun at the final ceremony really knocked me out).

It also demands a certain sensibility from the audience — the more you know of pre-Christian Britain, the more you get from the film.

In point of fact, there is nothing intrinsically of fantasy in *The Wicker Man* except the premise that a small segment of contemporary society could revolt in this way and get away with it. (Even that is not all that unlikely; within memory a Mexican village tossed out its priests and went back to the old Mayan gods.)

There have been attempts at this kind of thing in American books and films, notably *Harvest Home*. As usual, our British cousins have done it better.

Since all is equality now, I presume that men these days, as well as women,

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have the prerogative of changing their minds. I have three matters of conscience in that direction to bring up.

Readers will remember that while I had a good time at the *Buck Rogers* movie, I came down pretty hard on the TV series just after it started. Well, I must say that it really picked itself up by its bootstraps and ended the season by being as amusing as the film.

As science fiction, it's still more high tack than high tech, but Gil Gerard's charm seems endless; I've even gotten to like that dopey Wilma and the dopier Twiki; and as for Princess what's-'er-Name of Draconia, I'm in love. The poor lady tries so hard to get Buck into bed, and fails so abysmally. And what a wardrobe! (That's the high tack part.)

And back in the mists of time, I made unpleasant noises about a movie called *Phase 4*, while conceding the extraordinary quality of the microphotography in this tale of mutant ants. After two further viewings on TV, I became aware that the film was a good deal more sensible than I was, and that my first reaction had been singularly obtuse.

It pops up on the tube every once in a while; I strongly urge you to see it.

And while I still maintain that the 1976 *King Kong* was a major disaster, the recent showing on TV reminded me of a couple of things I did like about it. They were Jessica Lange's Dwan, the most dizzily likeable blonde since Judy Holliday; Jeff Bridge's realistically scruffy photographer; and two nice little scenes, the one in the jungle pool and the one in the deserted bar.

So there! Who says critics aren't human?

Coming soon

Michael Shea's first F&SF story was "The Angel of Death" (August 1979), an unusual and distinctive sf-horror story that received a lot of notice. His new novella "The Autopsy" is the feature story in the December issue. It is a remarkably scary and intense story, the kind of piece that will be anthologized and talked about for some time to come.

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In which the Good Doctor proves that he always thinks big, even when he's just horsing around....

Death of A Foy

BY

ISAAC ASIMOV

It was extremely unusual for a Foy to be dying on Earth. They were the highest social class on their planet (with a name which was pronounced—as nearly as Earthly throats could make the sounds—Sortibakenstrete) and were virtually immortal.

Every Foy, of course, came to voluntary death eventually, and this one had given up because of an ill-starred love affair, if you can call it a love affair where five individuals, in order to reproduce, must indulge in a year-long mental contact. Apparently, he himself had not fit into the contact after several months of trying, and it had broken his heart—or hearts, for he had five.

All Foys had five large hearts and there was speculation that it was this that made them virtually immortal.

Maude Briscoe, Earth's most renowned surgeon, wanted those hearts. "It can't be just their number and size, Ray," she said to her chief assistant. "It has to be something physiological or biochemical. I must have them."

"I don't know if we can manage that," said Ray Johnson. "I've been speaking to him earnestly, trying to overcome the Foy tabu against dismemberment after death. I've had to play on the feeling of tragedy any Foy would have over death away from home. And I've had to lie to him, Maude."

"Lie?"

"I told him that after death, there would be a dirge sung for him by the world-famous choir led by Harold J. Gassenbaum. I told him that by Earthly belief this would mean that his astral essence would be instantaneously wafted back, through hyperspace, to his home-planet of Sortib-what's-its-name. —Provided he would sign a re-

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lease allowing you, Maude, to have his hearts for scientific investigation."

"Don't tell me he believed that horse-excrement!" said Maude.

"Well, you know this modern attitude about accepting the myths and beliefs of intelligent aliens. It wouldn't have been polite for him not to believe me. Besides, the Foys have a profound admiration for Terrestrial science, and I think this one is a little flattered that we should want his hearts. He promised to consider the suggestion, and I hope he decides soon because he can't live more than another day or so, and we must have his permission by interstellar law, and the hearts must be fresh, and— Ah, his signal."

Ray Johnson moved in with smooth and noiseless speed.

"Yes?" he whispered, unobtrusively turning on the holographic recording device in case the Foy wished to grant permission.

The Foy's large, gnarled, rather tree-like body lay motionless on the bed. The bulging eyes palpitated (all five of them) as they rose, each on its stalk, and turned toward Ray. The Foy's voice had a strange tone and the lipless edges of his open round mouth did not move, but the words formed perfectly. His eyes were making the Foyan gesture of assent as he said:

"Give my big hearts to Maude, Ray. Dismember me for Harold's choir. Tell all the Foys on Sortibaken-strete, that I will soon be there—"

(from page 66)

In a year or so I'll receive my free copy, hand-printed in Solaris Press's characteristic heavy black type, by way of some sheep drove up through the Borders. If Monk is fast in getting it out and the trade routes are kind, who knows, it just might just get on the ballot for '83 — to be voted at the fishing village of Santa Barbara, way across the Plains and Deserts and Badlands.

Can I possibly make it to Santa Barbara? Truth to tell, I can hardly wait. After this year's wonderful thrash, I'll be on the sailship — and I'll board those stagecoaches, come Hell or high water.

I nudged Jeremy in the ribs.

"We own the stars," I said. "You and I."

(from page 91)

more than the innocent instrument through whom Hartson's own despair was unwittingly focused and given form; drawn to seek him out even in her sleep; a lost and ignorant message-bearer, wandering in some strange lonely limbo of the spirit of which she was not even aware?

Shall we ever know where that final message came from, or live to learn what it meant?

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Tanith Lee ("Red As Blood," July 1979) returns with a striking fantasy about a wealthy recluse who lives in a wild forest and is perhaps mad. Ms. Lee's new novels include SABELLA OR THE BLOOD STONE, an sf vampire novel and DAY BY NIGHT, both from DAW Books.

Wolfland

BY

TANITH LEE

1.

When the summons arrived from Anna the Matriarch, Lisel did not wish to obey. The twilit winter had already come, and the great snows were down, spreading their aprons of shining ice, turning the trees to crystal candelabra. Lisel wanted to stay in the city, skating fur-clad on the frozen river beneath the torches, dancing till four in the morning, a vivid blonde in the flame-bright ballrooms, breaking hearts and not minding, lying late next day like a cat in her warm, soft bed. She did not want to go traveling several hours into the north to visit Anna the Matriarch.

Lisel's mother had been dead sixteen years, all Lisel's life. Her father had let her have her own way, in almost everything, for about the same length of time. But Anna the Matriarch, Lisel's maternal grandmother, was exceedingly rich. She lived thirty miles from the city, in a great wild château in the great wild forest.

A portrait of Anna as a young widow hung in the gallery of Lisel's father's house, a wicked-looking bone-pale person in a black dress, with rubies and diamonds at her throat, and in her ivory yellow hair. Even in her absence, Anna had always had a say in things. A recluse, she had still manipulated like a puppet-master from behind the curtain of the forest. Periodic instructions had been sent, pertaining to Lisel. The girl must be educated by this or that method. She must gain this or that accomplishment, read this or that book, favor this or that cologne or color or jewel. The latter orders were always uncannily apposite and were often complemented by applicable — and sumptuous — gifts. The summons

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came in company with such. A swirling cloak of scarlet velvet leapt like a fire from its box to Lisel's hands. It was lined with albino fur, all but the hood, which was lined with the finest and heaviest red brocade. A clasp of gold joined the garment at the throat, the two portions, when closed, forming Anna's personal device, a many-petaled flower. Lisel had exclaimed with pleasure, embracing the cloak, picturing herself flying in it across the solid white river like a dangerous blood-red rose. Then the letter fell from its folds.

Lisel had never seen her grandmother, at least, not intelligently, for Anna had been in her proximity on one occasion only: the hour of her birth. Then, one glimpse had apparently sufficed. Anna had snatched it, and sped away from her son-in-law's house and the salubrious city in a demented black carriage. Now, as peremptory as then, she demanded that Lisel come to visit her before the week was out. Over thirty miles, into the uncivilized northern forest, to the strange mansion in the snow.

"Preposterous," said Lisel's father. "The woman is mad, as I've always suspected."

"I shan't go," said Lisel.

They both knew quite well that she would.

One day, every considerable thing her grandmother possessed would pass to Lisel, providing Lisel did not incur Anna's displeasure.

* * *

Half a week later, Lisel was on the northern road.

She sat amid cushions and rugs, in a high sled strung with silver bells, and drawn by a single black-satin horse. Before Lisel perched her driver, the whip in his hand, and a pistol at his belt, for the way north was not without its risks. There were, besides, three outriders, also equipped with whips, pistols and knives, and muffled to the brows in fur. No female companion was in evidence. Anna had stipulated that it would be unnecessary and superfluous for her grandchild to burden herself with a maid.

But the whips had cracked, the horses had started off. The runners of the sled had smoothly hissed, sending up lace-like sprays of ice. Once clear of the city, the north road opened like a perfect skating floor of milky glass, dim-lit by the fragile winter sun smoking low on the horizon. The silver bells sang, and the fierce still air through which the horses dashed, broke on Lisel's cheeks like the coldest champagne. Ablaze in her scarlet cloak, she was exhilarated and began to forget she had not wanted to come.

After about an hour, the forest marched up out of the ground and swiftly enveloped the road on all sides.

There was presently an insidious, but generally perceptible change. Between the walls of the forest there gathered a new silence, a silence which was, if anything, *alive*, a personality which atended any humanly noisy

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passage with a cruel and resentful interest. Lisel stared up into the narrow lane of sky above. They might have been moving along the channel of a deep and partly frozen stream. When the drowned sun flashed through, splinters of light scattered and went out as if in water.

The tall pines in their pelts of snow seemed posed to lurch across the road.

The sled had been driving through the forest for perhaps another hour, when a wolf wailed somewhere amid the trees. Rather than break the silence of the place, the cry seemed born of the silence, a natural expression of the landscape's cold solitude and immensity.

The outriders touched the pistols in their belts, almost religiously, and the nearest of the three leaned to Lisel.

"Madame Anna's house isn't so far from here. In any case we have our guns, and these horses could race the wind."

"I'm not afraid," Lisel said haughtily. She glanced at the trees. "I've never seen a wolf. I should be interested to see one."

Made sullen by Lisel's pert reply, the outrider switched tactics. From trying to reassure her, he now ominously said:

"Pray you don't, m'mselle. One wolf generally means a pack, and once the snow comes, they're hungry."

"As my father's servant, I would expect you to sacrifice yourself for me, of course," said Lisel. "A fine strong man like you should keep a pack of wolves busy long enough for the rest of us to escape."

The man scowled and spurred away from her.

Lisel smiled to herself. She was not at all afraid, not of the problematical wolves, not even of the eccentric grandmother she had never before seen. In a way, Lisel was looking forwar to the meeting, now her annoyance at vacating the city had left her. There had been so many bizarre tales, so much hearsay. Lisel had even caught gossip concerning Anna's husband. He had been a handsome princely man, whose inclinations had not matched his appearance. Lisel's mother had been sent to the city to live with relations to avoid this monster's outbursts of perverse lust and savagery. He had allegedly died one night, mysteriously and luridly murdered on one of the forest tracks. This was not the history Lisel had got from her father, to be sure, but she had always partly credited the more extravagant version. After all, Anna the Matriarch was scarcely commonplace in her mode of life on her attitude to her granddaughter.

Yes, indeed, rather than apprehension, Lisel was beginning to entertain a faintly unholy glee in respect of the visit and the insights it might afford her.

A few minutes after the wolf had howled, the road took a sharp bend, and emerging around it, the party

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beheld an unexpected obstacle in the way. The driver of the sled cursed softly and drew hard on the reins, bringing the horse to a standstill. The outriders similarly halted. Each peered ahead to where, about twenty yards along the road, a great black carriage blotted the white snow.

A coachman sat immobile on the box of the black carriage, muffled in coal-black furs and almost indistinguishable from them. In forceful contrast, the carriage horses were blonds, and restless, tossing their necks, lifting their feet. A single creature stood on the track between the carriage and the sled. It was too small to be a man, too curiously proportioned to be simply a child.

"What's this?" demanded the third of Lisel's outriders, he who had spoken earlier of the wolves. It was an empty question, but had been a long time in finding a voice for all that.

"I think it is my grandmother's carriage come to meet me," declared Lisel brightly, though, for the first, she had felt a pang of apprehension.

This was not lessened, when the dwarf came loping towards them, like a small, misshapen, furry dog and, reaching the sled, spoke to her, ignoring the others.

"You may leave your escort here and come with us."

Lisel was struck at once by the musical quality of his voice, while out of the shadow of his hood emerged the face of a fair and melancholy angel. As she stared at him, the men about her raised their objections.

"We're to go with m'mselle to her grandmother's house."

"You are not necessary," announced the beautiful dwarf, glancing at them with uninterest. "You are already on the Lady Anna's lands. The coachman and I are all the protection your mistress needs. The Lady Anna does not wish to receive you on her estate."

"What proof," snarled the third outrider, "that you're from Madame's château? Or that she told you to say such a thing. You could have come from any place, from hell itself most likely, and they crushed you in the door as you were coming out."

The riders and the driver laughed brutishly. The dwarf paid no attention to the insult. He drew from his glove one delicate, perfectly formed hand, and in it a folded letter. It was easy to recognize the Matriarch's sanguine wax and the imprint of the petaled flower. The riders brooded, and the dwarf held the letter towards Lisel. She accepted it with an uncanny but pronounced reluctance.

Chère, it said in its familiar, indeed its unmistakable, characters, *Why are you delaying the moment when I may look at you? Beautiful has already told you, I think, that your escort may go home. Anna is giving you her own escort, to guide you on the last laps of the journey. Come! Send the men away and step into the carriage.*

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Lisel, reaching the word, or rather the name, Beautiful, had glanced involuntarily at the dwarf, oddly frightened at its horrid contrariness and its peculiar truth. A foreboding had clenched around her young heart, and, for a second, inexplicable terror. It was certainly a dreadful dilemma. She could refuse, and refuse thereby the goodwill, the gifts, the ultimate fortune her grandmother could bestow. Or she could brush aside her silly childish fears and walk boldly from the sled to the carriage. Surely, she had always known Madame Anna was an eccentric. Had it not been a source of intrigued curiosity but a few moments ago?

Lisel made her decision.

"Go home," she said regally to her father's servants. "My grandmother is wise and would hardly put me in danger."

The men grumbled, glaring at her, and as they did so, she got out of the sled and moved along the road towards the stationary and funereal carriage. As she came closer, she made out the flower device stamped in gilt on the door. Then the dwarf had darted ahead of her, seized the door, and was holding it wide, bowing to his knees, thus almost into the snow. A lock of pure golden hair spilled across his forehead.

Lisel entered the carriage and sat on the somber cushions. Courageous prudence (or greed) had triumphed.

The door was shut. She felt the slight tremor as Beautiful leapt on the box beside the driver.

Morose and indecisive, the men her father had sent with her were still lingering on the ice between the trees, as she was driven away.

She must have slept, dazed by the continuous rocking of the carriage, but all at once she was wide awake, clutching in alarm at the upholstery. What had roused her was a unique and awful choir. The cries of wolves.

Quite irresistibly she pressed against the window and stared out, impelled to look for what she did not, after all, wish to see. And what she saw was unreassuring.

A horde of wolves were running, not merely in pursuit, but actually alongside the carriage. Pale they were, a pale almost luminous brownish shade, which made them seem phantasmal against the snow. Their small but jewel-like eyes glinted, glowed and burned. As they ran, their tongues lolling sideways from their mouths like those of huge hunting dogs, they seemed to smile up at her, and her heart turned over.

Why was it, she wondered, with panic-stricken anger, that the coach did not go faster and so outrun the pack? Why was it the brutes had been permitted to gain as much distance as they had? Could it be they had already plucked the coachman and the dwarf from the box and devoured them — she tried to recollect if, in her dozing,

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she had registered masculine shrieks of fear and agony — and that the horses plunged on in imagination, grown detailed and pessimistic, soon dispensed with these images, replacing them with that of great pepper-colored paws scratching on the frame of the coach, the grisly talons ripping at the door, at last a wolf's savage mask thrust through it, and her own frantic and pointless screaming, in the instants before her throat was silenced by the meeting of narrow yellow fangs.

Having run the gamut of her own premonition, Lisel sank back on the seat and yearned for a pistol, or at least a knife. A malicious streak in her lent her the extraordinary bravery of desiring to inflict as many hurts on her killers as she was able before they finished her. She also took space to curse Anna the Matriarch. How the wretched old woman would grieve and complain when the story reached her. The clean-picked bones of her granddaughter had been found a mere mile or so from her château, in the rags of a blood-red cloak; by the body a golden clasp, rejected as inedible....

A heavy thud caused Lisel to leap to her feet, even in the galloping, bouncing carriage. There at the door, grinning in on her, the huge face of a wolf, which did not fall away. Dimly she realized it must impossibly be balancing itself on the running board of the carriage, its front paws raised and somehow keeping purchase on the door. With one sharp determined effort of its head, it might conceivably smash in the pane of the window. The glass would lacerate, and the scent of its own blood further inflame its starvation. The eyes of it, doused by the carriage's gloom, flared up in two sudden pupilless ovals of fire, like two little portholes into hell.

With a shrill howl, scarcely knowing what she did, Lisel flung herself at the closed door and the wolf the far side of it. Her eyes also blazed, her teeth also were bared, and her nails raised as if to claw. Her horror was such that she appeared ready to attack the wolf in its own primeval mode, and as her hands struck the glass against its face, the wolf shied and dropped away.

In that moment, Lisel heard the musical voice of the dwarf call out from the box, some wordless whoop, and a tall gatepost sprang by.

Lisel understood they had entered the grounds of the Matriarch's château. And, a moment later, learned, though did not understand, that the wolves had not followed them beyond the gateway.

2

The Matriarch sat at the head of the long table. Her chair, like the table, was slender, carved and intensely polished. The rest of the chairs, though similarly high-backed and angular, were plain and dull, including the chair to which Lisel had been conducted. Which increased Lisel's annoyance, the

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petty annoyance to which her more eloquent emotions of fright and rage had given way, on entering the domestic, if curious, atmosphere of the house. And Lisel must strive to conceal her ill-temper. It was difficult.

The Château, ornate and swarthy under its pointings of snow, retained an air of decadent magnificence, which was increased within. Twin stairs flared from an immense great hall. A hearth, large as a room, and crow-hooded by its enormous mantel, roared with muffled firelight. There was scarcely a furnishing that was not at least two hundred years old, and many were much older. The very air seemed tinged by the somber wood, the treacle darkness of the draperies, the old-gold gleams of picture frames, gilding and tableware.

At the center of it all sat Madame Anna, in her eighty-first year, a weird apparition of improbable glamour. She appeared, from no more than a yard or so away, to be little over fifty. Her skin, though very dry, had scarcely any lines in it, and none of the pleatings and collapses Lisel generally associated with the elderly. Anna's hair had remained blonde, a fact Lisel was inclined to attribute to some preparation out of a bottle, yet she was not sure. The lady wore black as she had done in the portrait of her youth, a black starred over with astonishing jewels. But her nails were very long and discolored, as were her teeth. These two incontrovertible proofs of old age gave Lisel a perverse satisfaction. Grandmother's eyes, on the other hand, were not so reassuring. Brilliant eyes, clear and very likely sharp-sighted, of a pallid silvery brown. Unnerving eyes, but Lisel did her best to stare them out, though when Anna spoke to her, Lisel now answered softly, ingratiatingly.

There had not, however, been much conversation, after the first clamor at the doorway:

"We were chased by wolves!" Lisel had cried. "Scores of them! Your coachman is a dolt who doesn't know enough to carry a pistol. I might have been killed."

"You were not," said Anna, imperiously standing in silhouette against the giant window of the hall, a stained glass of what appeared to be a hunting scene, done in murky reds and staring white.

"No thanks to your servants. You promised me an escort — the only reason I sent my father's men away."

"You had your escort."

Lisel had choked back another flood of sentences; she did not want to get on the wrong side of this strange relative. Nor had she liked the slight emphasis on the word "escort."

The handsome ghastly dwarf had gone forward into the hall, lifted the hem of Anna's long mantle, and kissed it. Anna had smoothed off his hood and caressed the bright hair beneath.

"Beautiful wasn't afraid," said Anna decidedly. "But, then, my people

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know the wolves will not harm them."

An ancient tale came back to Lisel in that moment. It concerned certain human denizens of the forests, who had power over wild beasts. It occurred to Lisel that mad old Anna liked to fancy herself a sorceress, and Lisel said fawningly: "I should have known I'd be safe. I'm sorry for my outburst, but I don't know the forest as you do. I was afraid."

In her allotted bedroom, a silver ewer and basin stood on a table. The embroideries on the canopied bed were faded but priceless. Antique books stood in a case, catching the firelight, a vast yet random selection of the poetry and prose of many lands. From the bedchamber window, Lisel could look out across the clearing of the park, the white sweep of it occasionally broken by trees in their winter foliage of snow, or by the slash of the track which broke through the high wall. Beyond the wall, the forest pressed close under the heavy twilight of the sky. Lisel pondered with a grim irritation the open gateway. Wolves running, and the way to the château left wide at all times. She visualized mad Anna throwing chunks of raw meat to the wolves as another woman would toss bread to swans.

This unprepossessing notion returned to Lisel during the unusually early dinner, when she realized that Anna was receiving from her silent gliding servants various dishes of raw meats.

"I hope," said Anna, catching Lisel's eye, "my repast won't offend a delicate stomach. I have learned that the best way to keep my health is to eat the fruits of the earth in their intended state — so much goodness is wasted in cooking and garnishing."

Despite the reference to fruit, Anna touched none of the fruit or vegetables on the table. Nor did she drink any wine.

Lisel began again to be amused, if rather dubiously. Her own fare was excellent, and she ate it hungrily, admiring as she did so the crystal goblets and gold-handled knives which one day would be hers.

Presently a celebrated liqueur was served — to Lisel alone — and Anna rose on the black wings of her dress, waving her granddaughter to the fire. Beautiful, meanwhile, had crawled onto the stool of the tall piano and begun to play wildly despairing romances there, his elegant fingers darting over discolored keys so like Anna's strong yet senile teeth.

"Well," said Anna, reseating herself in another carven throne before the cave of the hearth. "What do you think of us?"

"Think, Grandmère? Should I presume?"

"No. But you do."

"I think," said Lisel cautiously, "everything is very fine."

"And you are keenly aware, of course, the finery will eventually belong to you."

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"Oh, Grandmère!" exclaimed Lisel, quite genuinely shocked by such frankness.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Anna. Her eyes caught the fire and became like the eyes of the wolf at the carriage window. "You expect to be my heiress. It's quite normal you should be making an inventory. I shan't last forever. Once I'm gone, presumably everything will be yours."

Despite herself, Lisel gave an involuntary shiver. A sudden plan of selling the château to be rid of it flitted through her thoughts, but she quickly put it aside, in case the Matriarch somehow read her mind.

"Don't speak like that, Grandmère. This is the first time I've met you, and you talk of dying."

"Did I! No, I did not. I spoke of *departure*. Nothing dies, it simply transmogrifies." Lisel watched politely this display of apparent piety. "As for my mansion," Anna went on, "you mustn't consider sale, you know." Lisel blanched — as she had feared, her mind had been read, or could it merely be that Anna found her predictable? "The château has stood on this land for many centuries. The old name for the spot, do you know that?"

"No, Grandmère."

"This, like the whole of the forest, was called the Wolfland. Because it was the wolves' country before ever men set foot on it with their piffling little roads and tracks, their carriages and foolish frightened walls. Wolfland. Their country then, and when the winter comes, their country once more."

"As I saw, Grandmère," said Lisel tartly.

"As you saw. You'll see and hear more of them while you're in my house. Their voices come and go like the wind, as they do. When that little idiot of a sun slips away and the night rises, you may hear scratching on the lower floor windows. I needn't tell you to stay indoors, need I?"

"Why do you let animals run in your park?" demanded Lisel.

"Because," said Anna, "the land is theirs by right."

The dwarf began to strike a polonaise from the piano. Anna clapped her hands, and the music ended. Anna beckoned, and Beautiful slid off the stool like a precocious child caught stickying the keys. He came to Anna, and she played with his hair. His face remained unreadable, yet his pellucid eyes swam dreamily to Lisel's face. She felt embarrassed by the scene, and at his glance was angered to find herself blushing.

"There was a time," said Anna, "when I did not rule this house. When a man ruled here."

"Grandpère," said Lisel, looking resolutely at the fire.

"*Grandpère*, yes. *Grandpère.*" Her voice held the most awful scorn. "Grandpère believed it was a man's pleasure to beat his wife. You're young, but you should know,

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should be told. Every night, if I was not already sick from a beating, and sometimes when I was, I would hear his heavy drunken feet come stumbling to my door. At first I locked it, but I learned not to. What stood in his way he could always break. He was a strong man. A great legend of strength. I carry scars on my shoulders to this hour. One day I may show you."

Lisel gazed at Anna, caught between fascination and revulsion. "Why do I tell you?" Anna smiled. She had twisted Beautiful's gorgeous hair into a painful knot. Clearly it hurt him, but he made no sound, staring blindly at the ceiling. "I tell you, Lisel, because very soon your father will suggest to you that it is time you were wed. And however handsome or gracious the young man may seem to you that you choose, or that is chosen for you, however noble or marvelous or even docile he may seem, you have no way of being certain he will not turn out to be like your beloved grandpère. Do you know, he brought me peaches on our wedding night, all the way from the hothouses of the city. Then he showed me the whip he had been hiding under the fruit. You see what it is to be a woman, Lisel. Is that what you want? The irrevocable marriage vow that binds you forever to a monster? And even if he is a good man, which is a rare beast indeed, you may die an agonizing death in childbed, just as your mother did."

Lisel swallowed. A number of things went through her head now. A vague acknowledgement that, though she envisaged admiration, she had never wished to marry and therefore never considered it, and a starker awareness that she was being told improper things. She desired to learn more and dreaded to learn it. As she was struggling to find a rejoinder, Anna seemed to notice her own grip on the hair of the dwarf.

"Ah," she said, "forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you."

The words had an oddly sinister ring to them. Lisel suddenly guessed their origin, the brutish man rising from his act of depravity, of necessity still merely sketched by Lisel's innocence, whispering, gloatingly muttering: Forgive me. I did not mean to hurt.

"Beautiful," said Anna, "is the only man of any worth I've ever met. And my servants, of course, but I don't count them as men. Drink your liqueur."

"Yes, Grandmère," said Lisel, sipped, and slightly choked.

"Tomorrow," said Anna, "we must serve you something better. A vintage indigenous to the château, made from a flower which grows here in the spring. For now," again she rose on her raven's wings; a hundred gems caught the light and went out, "for now, we keep early hours here, in the country."

"But, Grandmère," said Lisel, astounded, "it's scarcely sunset."

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"In my house," said Anna, gently, "you will do as you are told, m'mselle."

And for once, Lisel did as she was told.

At first, of course, Lisel did not entertain a dream of sleep. She was used to staying awake till the early hours of the morning, rising at noon. She entered her bedroom, cast one scathing glance at the bed, and settled herself to read in a chair bedside the bedroom fire. Luckily she had found a lurid novel amid the choice of books. By skimming over all passages of meditation, description or philosophy, confining her attention to those portions which contained duels, rapes, black magic and the firing squad, she had soon made great inroads on the work. Occasionally, she would pause, and add another piece of wood to the fire. At such times she knew a medley of doubts concerning her grandmother. That the Matriarch could leave such a novel lying about openly where Lisel could get at it, outraged the girl's propriety.

Eventually, two or three hours after the sun had gone and the windows blackened entirely behind the drapes, Lisel did fall asleep. The excitements of the journey and her medley of reactions to Madame Anna had worn her out.

She woke, as she had in the carriage, with a start of alarm. Her reason was the same one. Out in the winter forest of night sounded the awesome choir of the wolves. Their voices rose and fell, swelling, diminshing, resurging, like great icy waves of wind or water, breaking on the silence of the château.

Partly nude, a lovely maiden had been bound to a stake and the first torch applied, but Lisel no longer cared very much for her fate. Setting the book aside, she rose from the chair. The flames were low on the candles and the fire almost out. There was no clock, but it had the feel of midnight. Lisel went to the window and opened the drapes. Stepping through and pulling them fast closed again behind her, she gazed out into the glowing darkness of snow and night.

The wolf cries went on and on, thrilling her with a horrible disquiet, so she wondered how even mad Anna could ever have grown accustomed to them? Was this what had driven grandfather to brutishness and beatings? And, colder thought, the mysterious violent death he was supposed to have suffered — what more violent than to be torn apart by long pointed teeth under the pine trees?

Lisel quartered the night scene with her eyes, looking for shapes to fit the noises, and, as before, hoping not to find them.

There was decidedly something about wolves. Something beyond their reputation and the stories of the half-eaten bodies of little children with which nurses regularly scared their

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charges. Something to do with actual appearance, movement: the lean shadow manifesting from between the trunks of trees — the stuff of nightmare. And their howlings—! Yet, as it went on and on, Lisel became aware of a bizarre exhilaration, an almost-pleasure in the awful sounds which made the hair lift on her scalp and gooseflesh creep along her arms — the same sort of sensation as biting into a slice of lemon—

And then she saw it, a great pale wolf. It loped by directly beneath the window, and suddenly, to Lisel's horror, it raised its long head, and two fireworks flashed, which were its eyes meeting with hers. A primordial fear, worse even than in the carriage, turned Lisel's bones to liquid. She sank on her knees, and as she knelt there foolishly, as if in prayer, her chin on the sill, she beheld the wolf moving away across the park, seeming to dissolve into the gloom.

Gradually, then, the voices of the other wolves began to dull, eventually falling quiet.

Lisel got up, came back into the room, threw more wood on the fire and crouched there. It seemed odd to her that the wolf had run *away* from the château, but she was not sure why. Presumably it had ventured near in hopes of food, then, disappointed, withdrawn. That it had come from the spot directly by the hall's doors did not, could not, mean anything in particular. Then Lisel realized what had been so strange. She had seen the wolf in a faint radiance of light — but from where? The moon was almost full, but obscured behind the house. The drapes had been drawn across behind her, the light could not have fallen down from her own window. She was turning back unhappily to the window to investigate when she heard the unmistakable soft thud of a large door being carefully shut below her, in the château.

The wolf had been in the house. Anna's guest.

Lisel was petrified for a few moments, then a sort of fury came to her rescue. How dared the old woman be so mad as all this and expect her civilized granddaughter to endure it? Brought to the wilds, told improper tales, left improper literature to read, made unwilling party to the entertainment of savage beasts. Perhaps as a result of the reading matter, Lisel saw her only course abruptly, and it was escape. (She had already assumed Anna would not allow her grandchild to depart until whatever lunatic game the old beldame was playing was completed.) But if escape, then how? Though there were carriage, horses, even coachmen, all were Anna's. Lisel did not have to ponder long, however. Her fathers' cynicism on the lower classes had convinced her that anyone had his price. She would bribe the coachman — her gold bracelets and her ruby eardrops — both previous gifts of Anna's, in fact. She could

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assure the man of her father's protection and further valuables when they reached the city. A vile thought came to her at that, that her father might, after all, prove unsympathetic. Was she being stupid? Should she turn a blind eye to Anna's wolfish foibles? If Anna should disinherit her, as surely she would on Lisel's flight—

Assailed by doubts, Lisel paced the room. Soon she had added to them. The coachman might snatch her bribe and still refuse to help her. Or worse, drive her into the forest and violate her. Or—

The night slowed and flowed into the black valleys of early morning. The moon crested the château and sank into the forest. Lisel sat on the edge of the canopied bed, pleating and repleating the folds of the scarlet cloak between her fingers. Her face was pale, her blonde hair untidy and her eyes enlarged. She looked every bit as crazy as her grandmother.

Her decision was sudden, made with an awareness that she had wasted much time. She flung the cloak round herself and started up. She hurried to the bedroom door and softly, softly, opened it a tiny crack.

All was black in the house, neither lamp nor candle visible anywhere. The sight, or rather lack of it, caused Lisel's heart to sink. At the same instant, it indicated that the whole house was abed. Lisel's plan was a simple one. A passage led away from the great hall to the kitchens and servants' quarters and ultimately to a courtyard containing coachhouse and stables. Here the grooms and the coachman would sleep, and here too another gateway opened on the park. These details she had either seen for herself as the carriage was driven off on her arrival or deduced from the apparent structure of the château. Unsure of the hour, yet she felt dawn was approaching. If she could but reach the servants' quarters, she should be able to locate the courtyard. If the coachman proved a villain, she would have to use her wits. Threaten him or cajole him. Knowing very little of physical communion, it seemed better to Lisel in those moments, to lie down with a hairy peasant than to remain the Matriarch's captive. It was that time of night when humans are often prey to ominous or extravagant ideas of all sorts. She took up one of the low-burning candles. Closing the bedroom door behind her, Lisel stole forward into the black nothingness of unfamiliarity.

Even with the feeble light, she could barely see ten inches before her, and felt cautiously about with her free hand, dreading to collide with ornament or furniture and thereby rouse her enemies. The stray gleams, shot back at her from a mirror or a picture frame, misled rather than aided her. At first her total concentration was taken up with her safe progress and her quest to find the head of the double stair. Presently, however, as she pressed on without mishap, secondary considera-

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ations began to steal in on her.

If it was difficult to proceed, how much more difficult it might be should she desire to retreat. Hopefully, there would be nothing to retreat from. But the ambience of the château, inspired by night and the limited candle, was growing more sinister by the second. Arches opened on drapes of black from which anything might spring. All about, the shadow furled, and she was one small target moving in it, lit as if on a stage.

She turned the passage and perceived the curve of the stair ahead and the dim hall below. The great stained window provided a grey illumination which elsewhere was absent. The stars bled on the snow outside and pierced the white panes. Or could it be the initial tinge of dawn?

Lisel paused, confronting once again the silliness of her simple plan of escape. Instinctively, she turned to look the way she had come, and the swiftness of the motion, or some complementary draught, quenched her candle. She stood marooned by this cliché, the phosphorescently discernible space before her, pitch-dark behind, and chose the path into the half-light as preferable.

She went down the stair delicately, as if descending into a ballroom. When she was some twenty steps from the bottom, something moved in the thick drapes beside the outer doors. Lisel froze, feeling a shock like an electric volt passing through her vitals. In another second she knew from the uncanny littleness of the shape that it was Anna's dwarf who scuttled there. But before she divined what it was at, one leaf of the door began to swing heavily inwards.

Lisel felt no second shock of fear. She felt instead as if her soul drifted upward from her flesh.

Through the open door soaked the pale ghost-light that heralded sunrise, and with that, a scattering of fresh white snow. Lastly through the door, its long feet crushing both light and snow, glided the wolf she had seen beneath her window. It did not look real, it seemed to waver and to shine, yet, for any who had ever heard the name of wolf, or a single story of them, or the song of their voices, here stood that word, that story, that voice, personified.

The wolf raised its supernatural head and once more it looked at the young girl.

The moment held no reason, no pity, and certainly no longer any hope of escape.

As the wolf began to pad noiselessly towards Lisel up the stair, she fled by the only route now possible to her. Into unconsciousness.

3

She came to herself to find the face of a prince from a romance poised over hers. He was handsome enough to have kissed her awake, except that she knew immediately it was the dwarf.

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"Get away from me!" she shrieked, and he moved aside.

She was in the bedchamber, lying on the canopied bed. She was not dead, she had not been eaten or had her throat torn out.

As if in response to her thoughts, the dwarf said musically to her: "You have had a nightmare, m'mselle." But she could tell from a faint expression somewhere between his eyes, that he did not truly expect her to believe such a feeble equivocation.

"There was a wolf," said Lisel, pulling herself into a sitting position, noting that she was still gowned and wearing the scarlet cloak. "A wolf which *you* let into the house."

"I?" The dwarf elegantly raised an eyebrow.

"You, you frog. Where is my grandmother? I demand to see her at once."

"The Lady Anna is resting. She sleeps late in the mornings."

"Wake her."

"Your pardon, m'mselle, but I take my orders from Madame." The dwarf bowed. "If you are recovered and hungry, a maid will bring petit déjeuner at once to your room, and hot water for bathing, when you are ready."

Lisel frowned. Her ordeal past, her anger paramount, she was still very hungry. An absurd notion came to her — *had* it all been a dream? No, she would not so doubt herself. Even though the wolf had not harmed her, it had been real. A household pet, then? She had heard of deranged monarchs who kept lions or tigers like cats. Why not a wolf kept like a dog?

"Bring me my breakfast," she snapped, and the dwarf bowed himself goldenly out.

All avenues of escape seemed closed, yet by day (for it was day, the tawny gloaming of winter) the phenomena of the darkness seemed far removed. Most of their terror had gone with them. With instinctive immature good sense, Lisel acknowledged that no hurt had come to her, that she was indeed being cherished.

She wished she had thought to reprimand the dwarf for his mention of intimate hot water and his presence in her bedroom. Recollections of unseemly novelettes led her to a swift examination of her apparel—unscathed. She rose and stood morosely by the fire, waiting for her breakfast, tapping her foot.

By the hour of noon, Lisel's impatience had reached its zenith with the sun. Of the two, only the sun's zenith was insignificant.

Lisel left the bedroom, flounced along the corridor and came to the stairhead. Eerie memories of the previous night had trouble in remaining with her. Everything seemed to have become rather absurd, but this served only to increase her annoyance. Lisel went down the stair boldly. The fire was lit in the enormous hearth and

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blazing cheerfuly. Lisel prowled about, gazing at the dubious stained glass, which she now saw did not portray a hunting scene at all, but some pagan subject of men metamorphosing into wolves.

At length a maid appeared. Lisel marched up to her.

"Kindly inform my grandmother that I am awaiting her in the hall."

The maid seemed struggling to repress a laugh, but she bobbed a curtsey and darted off. She did not come back, and neither did grandmother.

When a man entered bearing logs for the fire, Lisel said to him, "Put those down and take me at once to the coachman."

The man nodded and gestured her to follow him without a word of acquiescence or disagreement. Lisel, as she let herself be led through the back corridors and by the hub-bub of the huge stone kitchen, was struck by the incongruousness of her actions. No longer afraid, she felt foolish. She was carrying out her "plan" of the night before from sheer pique, nor did she have any greater hope of success. It was more as if some deeply hidden part of herself prompted her to flight, in spite of all resolutions, rationality and desire. But it was rather like trying to walk on a numbed foot. She could manage to do it, but without feeling.

The coaching-house and stables bulked gloomily about the courtyard, where the snow had renewed itself in dazzling white drifts. The coachman stood in his black furs beside an iron brazier. One of the blond horses was being shod in an old-fashioned manner, the coachman overseeing the exercise. Seeking to ingratiate herself, Lisel spoke to the coachman in a silky voice.

"I remarked yesterday, how well you controlled the horses when the wolves came after the carriage."

The coachman did not answer, but hearing her voice, the horse sidled a little, rolling its eye at her.

"Suppose," said Lisel to the coachman, "I were to ask you if you would take me back to the city. What would you say?"

Nothing, apparently.

The stove sizzled and the hammer of the blacksmithing groom smacked the nails home into the horse's hoof. Lisel found the process disconcerting.

"You must understand," she said to the coachman, "my father would give you a great deal of money. He's unwell and wishes me to return. I received word this morning."

The coachman hulked there like a big black bear, and Lisel had the urge to bite him viciously.

"My grandmother," she announced, "would order you to obey me, but she is presently in bed."

"No, she is not," said the Matriarch at Lisel's back, and Lisel almost screamed. She shot around, and stared at the old woman, who stood about a foot away, imperious in her furs, jewels frostily blistering on her wrists.

"I wish," said Lisel, taking umbrage

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as her shield, "to go home at once."

"So I gather. But you can't, I regret."

"You mean to keep me prisoner?" blurted Lisel.

Grandmother laughed. The laugh was like fresh ice crackling under a steel skate. "Not at all. The road is snowed under and won't be clear for several days. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with us a while longer."

Lisel, in a turmoil she could not herself altogether fathom, had her attention diverted by the behavior of the horse. It was bristling like a cat, tossing its head, dancing against the rope by which the second groom was holding it.

Anna walked at once out into the yard and began to approach the horse from the front. The horse instantly grew more agitated, kicking up its heels, and neighing croupily. Lisel almost cried an automatic warning, but restrained herself. Let the beldame get a kicking, she deserved it. Rather to Lisel's chagrin, Anna reached the horse without actually having her brains dashed out. She showed not a moment's hesitation or doubt, placing her hand on its long nose, eying it with an amused tenderness. She looked very cruel and very indomitable.

"There now," said Anna to the horse, which, fallen quiet and still, yet trembled feverishly. "You know you are used to me. You know you were trained to endure me since you were a foal, as your brothers are sometimes trained to endure fire."

The horse hung its head and shivered, cowed but noble.

Anna left it and strolled back throgh the snow. She came to Lisel and took her arm.

"I'm afraid," said Anna, guiding them towards the château door, "that they're never entirely at peace when I'm in the vicinity, though they are good horses, and well-trained. They have borne me long distances in the carriage."

"Do they fear you because you ill-treat them?" Lisel asked impetuously.

"Oh, not at all. They fear me because to them I smell of wolf."

Lisel bridled.

"Then do you think it wise to keep such a pet in the house?" she flared.

Anna chuckled. It was not necessarily a merry sound.

"That's what you think, is it? What a little dunce you are, Lisel. *I* am the beast you saw last night, and you had better get accustomed to it. Grandmère is a werewolf."

The return walk through the domestic corridors into the hall was notable for its silence. The dreadful Anna, her grip on the girl's arm unabated, smiled thoughtfully to herself. Lisel was obviously also deliberating inwardly. Her conclusions, however, continued to lean to the deranged rather than the occult. Propitiation suggested itself, as formerly, to be the answer. So, as they entered the hall,

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casting their cloaks to a servant, Lisel brightly exclaimed:

"A were wolf, Grandmère. How interesting!"

"Dear me," said Anna, "what a child." She seated herself by the fire in one of her tall thrones. Beautiful had appeared. "Bring the liqueur and some biscuits," said Anna. "It's past the hour, but why should we be the slaves of custom?"

Lisel perched on a chair across the hearth, watching Anna guardedly.

"You are the interesting one," Anna now declared. "You look sulky rather than intimidated at being mured up here with one whom you wrongly suppose is a dangerous insane. No, ma chère, verily I'm not mad, but a transmogrifite. Every evening, once the sun sets, I become a wolf, and duly comport myself as a wolf does."

"You're going to eat me, then," snarled Lisel, irritated out of all attempts to placate.

"Eat you? Hardly necessary. The forest is bursting with game. I won't say I never tasted human meat, but I wouldn't stoop to devouring a blood relation. Enough is enough. Besides, I had the opportunity last night, don't you think, when you swooned away on the stairs not fifty feet from me. Of course, it was almost dawn, and I *had* dined, but to rip out your throat would have been the work only of a moment. Thereafter we might have stored you in the cold larder against a lean winter."

"How dare you try to frighten me in this way!" screamed Lisel in a paroxysm of rage.

Beautiful was coming back with a silver tray. On the tray rested a plate of biscuits and a decanter of the finest cut glass containing a golden drink.

"You note, Beautiful," said Madame Anna, "I like this wretched granddaughter of mine. She's very like me."

"Does that dwarf know you are a *werewolf?*" demanded Lisel, with baleful irony.

"Who else lets me in and out at night? But all my servants know, just as my other folk know, in the forest."

"You're disgusting," said Lisel.

"Tut, I shall disinherit you. Don't you want my fortune any more?"

Beautiful set down the tray on a small table between them and began to pour the liqueur, smooth as honey, into two tiny crystal goblets.

Lisel watched. She remembered the nasty dishes of raw meat — part of Anna's game of werewolfery — and the drinking of water, but no wine. Lisel smirked, thinking she had caught the Matriarch out. She kept still and accepted the glass from Beautiful, who, while she remained seated, was a mere inch taller than she.

"I toast you," said Anna, raising her glass to Lisel. "Your health and your joy." She sipped. A strange look came into her strange eyes. "We have," she said, "a brief winter afternoon before us. There is just the time to tell

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you what you should be told."

"Why bother with me. I'm disinherited."

"Hardly. Taste the liqueur. You will enjoy it."

"I'm surprised that you did, Grandmère."

"Don't be," said Anna with asperity. "This wine is special to this place. We make it from a flower which grows here. A little yellow flower that comes in the spring, or sometimes, even in the winter. There is a difference then, of course. Do you recall the flower of my excutcheon? It is the self-same one."

Lisel sipped the liqueur. She had had a fleeting fancy it might be drugged or tampered with in some way, but both drinks had come from the decanter. Besides, what would be the point? The Matriarch valued an audience. The wine was pleasing, fragrant and, rather than sweet as Lisel had anticipated, tart. The flower which grew in winter was plainly another demented tale.

Relaxed, Lisel leant back in her chair. She gazed at the flames in the wide hearth. Her mad grandmother began to speak to her in a quiet, floating voice, and Lisel saw pictures form in the fire. Pictures of Anna, and of the château, and of darkness itself....

4

How young Anna looked. She was in her twenties. She wore a scarlet gown and a scarlet cloak lined with pale fur and heavy brocade. It resembled Lisel's cloak but had a different clasp. Snow melted on the shoulders of the cloak, and Anna held her slender hands to the fire on the hearth. Free of the hood, her hair, like marvelously tarnished ivory, was piled on her head, and there was a yellow flower in it. She wore ruby eardrops. She looked just like Lisel, or Lisel as she would become in six years or seven.

Someone called: It was more a roar than a call, as if a great beast came trampling into the château. He was a big man, dark, all darkness, his features hidden in a black beard, black hair — more, in a sort of swirling miasmic cloud, a kind of psychic smoke: Anna's hatred and fear. He bellowed for liquor and a servant came running with a jug and cup. The man, Anna's husband, cuffed the servant aside, grabbing the jug as he did so. He strode to Anna, spun her about, grabbed her face in his hand as he had grabbed the jug. He leaned to her as if to kiss her, but he did not kiss, he merely stared. She had steeled herself not to shrink from him, so much was evident. His eyes, roving over her to find some overt trace of distaste or fright, suddenly found instead the yellow flower. He vented a powerful oath. His paw flung up and wrenched the flower free. He slung it in the fire and spat after it.

"You stupid bitch," he growled at her. "Where did you come on that?"

"It's only a flower."

"Not only a flower. Answer me, where? Or do I strike you?"

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"Several of them are growing near the gate, beside the wall; and in the forest. I saw them when I was riding."

The man shouted again for his servant. He told him to take a fellow and go out. They must locate the flowers and burn them.

"Another superstition?" Anna asked. Her husband hit her across the head so she staggered and caught the mantel to steady herself.

"*Yes*," he sneered, "another one. Now come upstairs."

Anna said, "Please excuse me, sir. I am not well today."

He said in a low and smiling voice: "Do as I say, or you'll be worse."

The fire flared on the swirl of her bloody cloak as she moved to obey him.

And the image changed. There was a bedroom, fluttering with lamplight. Anna was perhaps thirty-five or six, but she looked older. She lay in bed, soaked in sweat, uttering hoarse low cries or sometimes preventing herself from crying. She was in labor. The child was difficult. There were other women about the bed. One muttered to her neighbor that it was beyond her how the master had ever come to sire a child, since he got his pleasure another way, and the poor lady's body gave evidence of how. Then Anna screamed. Someone bent over her. There was a peculiar muttering among the women, as if they attended at some holy ceremony.

And another image came. Anna was seated in a shawl of gilded hair. She held a baby on her lap and was playing with it in an intense, quite silent way. As her hair shifted, traceries became momently visible over her bare sholders, and arms, horrible traceries left by a lash.

"Let me take the child," said a voice, and one of the women from the former scene appeared. She lifted the baby from Anna's lap, and Anna let the baby go, only holding her arms and hands in such a way that she touched it to the last second. The other woman was older than Anna, a peasant dressed smartly for service in the château. "You mustn't fret yourself," she said.

"But I can't suckle her," said Anna. "I wanted to."

"There's another can do that," said the woman. "Rest yourself. Rest while he is away." When she said "he" there could be no doubt of the one to whom she referred.

"Then, I'll rest," said Anna. She reclined on pillows, wincing slightly as her back made contact with the fine soft silk. "Tell me about the flowers again. The yellow flowers.'"

The woman showed her teeth as she rocked the baby. For an instant her face was just like a wolf's.

"You're not afraid," she said. "*He* is. But it's always been here. the wolf-magic. It's part of the Wolfland. Wherever wolves have been, you can find the wolf-magic. Somewhere. In a stream or a cave, or in a patch of

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ground. The château has it. That's why the flowers grow here. Yes, I'll tell you, then, It's simple. If any eat the flowers, then they receive the gift. It comes from the spirit, the wolfwoman, or maybe she's a goddess, an old goddess left over from the beginning of things, before Christ came to save us all. She has the head of a wolf and yellow hair. You swallow the flowers, and you call her, and she comes, and she gives it you. And then it's yours, till you die."

"And then what? Payment?" said Anna dreamily. "Hell?"

"Maybe."

The image faded gently. Suddenly there was another which was not gentle, a parody of the scene before. Staring light showed the bedchamber. The man, his shadow-face smoldering, clutched Anna's baby in his hands. The baby shrieked; he swung it to and fro as if to smash it on some handy piece of furniture. Anna stood in her nightdress. She held a whip out to him.

"Beat me," she said. "Please beat me. I want you to. Put down the child and beat me. It would be so easy to hurt her, and so soon over, she's so small. But I'm stronger. You can hurt me much more. See how vulnerable and afraid I am. Beat *me*."

Then, with a snarl he tossed the child onto the bed where it lay wailing. He took the whip and caught Anna by her pale hair—

There was snow blowing like torn paper, everywhere. In the midst of it a servant woman, and a child perhaps a year old with soft dark hair, were seated in a carriage. Anna looked at them, then stepped away. A door slammed, horses broke into a gallop. Anna remained standing in the snow storm.

No picture came. A man's voice thundered: "Where? Where did you send the thing? It's mine, I sired it. My property. *Where?*"

But the only reply he got were moans of pain. She would not tell him, and did not. He nearly killed her that time.

Now it is night, but a black night bleached with whiteness, for a full moon is up above the tops of the winter pines.

Anna is poised, motionless, in a glade of the wild northern forest. She wears the scarlet cloak, but the moon has drained its color. The snow sparkles, the trees are umbrellas of diamond, somber only at their undersides. The moon slaps the world with light. Anna has been singing, or chanting something, and though it can no longer be heard, the dew of it lies heavy over the ground. Something is drawn there, too, in the snow, a circle, and another shape inside it. A fire has been kindled nearby, but now it has burned low, and has a curious bluish tinge to it. All at once a wind begins to come through the forest. But it is not wind, not even storm. It is the soul of the forest, the spirit of the Wolfland.

Anna goes to her knees. She is afraid, but it is a new fear, an exulting

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fear. The stalks of the flowers whose heads she has eaten lie under her knees, and she raises her face like a dish to the moonlight.

The pines groan. They bend. Branches snap and snow showers down from them. The creature of the forest is coming, nearer and nearer. It is a huge single wing, or an enormous engine. Everything breaks and sways before it, even the moonlight, and darkness fills the glade. And out of the darkness Something whirls. It is difficult to see, to be sure — a glimpse of gold, two eyes like dots of lava seven feet in the air, a grey jaw, hung breasts which have hair growing on them, the long hand which is not a hand, lifting — And then every wolf in the forest seems to give tongue, and the darnkess ebbs away.

Anna lies on her face. She is weeping. With terror. With — It is night again, and the man of the house is coming home.

He swaggers, full of local beer, and eager to get to his wife. He was angry, a short while since, because his carriage, which was to have waited for him outside the inn, had mysteriously vanished. There will be men to curse and brutalize in the courtyard before he goes up to his beloved Anna, a prelude to his final acts with her. He finds her a challenge, his wife. She seems able to withstand so much, looking at him proudly with horror in her eyes. It would bore him to break her. He likes the fact he cannot, or thinks he does. And tonight he has some good news. One of the paid men has brought word of their child. She is discovered at last. She can be brought home to the château to her father's care. She is two years old now. Strong and healthy. Yes, good news indeed.

They had known better in the village than to tell him he should beware on the forest track. He is not anxious about wolves, the distance being less than a mile, and he has his pistol. Besides, he organized a wolf hunt last month and cleared quite a few of the brutes off his land. The area about the château has been silent for many nights. Even Anna went walking without a servant — though he had not approved or that and had taught her a lesson. (Sometimes it occurs to him that she enjoys his lessons as much as he enjoys delivering them, for she seems constantly to seek out new ways to vex him.)

He is about a quarter of a mile from the château now, and here a small clearing opens off on both sides of the track. It is the night after the full moon, and her disc, an almost perfect round, glares down on the clearing from the pine tops. Anna's husband dislikes the clearing. He had forgotten he would have to go through it, for generally he is mounted or in the carriage when he passes the spot. There is some old superstition about the place. He hates it, just as he hates the stinking yellow flowers that grew in it before he burned them out. Why does he hate

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them? The woman who nursed him told him something and it frightened him, long ago. Well, no matter. He walks more quickly.

How quiet it is, how still. The whole night like a pane of black-white silence. He can hardly hear his own noisy footfalls. There is a disturbance in the snow, over there, a mark like a circle.

Then he realizes something is behind him. He is not sure how he realizes, for it is quite soundless. He stops, and turns, and sees a great and ghostly wolf a few feet from him on the track.

In a way, it is almost a relief to see the wolf. It is alone, and it is a natural thing. Somehow he had half expected something unnatural. He draws his pistol, readies it, points it at the wolf. He is a fine shot. He already visualizes lugging the bloody carcass, a trophy, into the house. He pulls the trigger.

A barren click. He is surprised. He tries again. Another click. It comes to him that his servant has emptied the chamber of bullets. He sees a vision of the park gates a quarter of a mile away, and he turns immediately and runs towards them.

Ten seconds later a warm and living weight crashes against his back, and he falls screaming, screaming before the pain even begins. When the pain does begin, he is unable to scream for very long, but he does his best. The final thing he sees through the haze of his own blood, which has splashed up into his eyes, and the tears of agony and the inclosing of a most atrocious death, are the eyes of the wolf, gleaming coolly back at him. He knows they are the eyes of Anna. And that it is Anna who then tears out his throat.

The small crystal goblet slipped out of Lisel's hand, empty, and broke on the floor. Lisel started. Dazed, she looked away from the fire, to Anna the Matriarch.

Had Lisel been asleep and dreaming? What an unpleasant dream. Or had it been so unpleasant? Lisel became aware her teeth were clenched in spiteful gladness, as if on a bone. If Anna had told her the truth, that man — that *thing* — had deserved it all. To be betrayed by his servants, and by his wife, and to perish in the fangs of a wolf. A werewolf.

Grandmother and granddaughter confronted each other a second, with identical expressions of smiling and abstracted malice. Lisel suddenly flushed, smoothed her face, and looked down. There had been something in the drink after all.

"I don't think this at all nice," said Lisel.

"Nice isn't the word," Anna agreed. Beautiful reclined at her feet, and she stroked his hair. Across the big room, the stained-glass window was thickening richly to opacity. The sun must be near to going down.

"*If* it's the truth," said Lisel primly, "you will go to hell."

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"Oh? Don't you think me justified? He'd have killed your mother at the very least. *You* would never have been born."

Lisel reviewed this hypothetical omission. It carried some weight.

"You should have appealed for help."

"To whom? The marriage vow is a chain that may not be broken. If I had left him, he would have traced me, as he did the child. No law supports a wife. I could only kill him."

"I don't believe you killed him as you say you did."

"Don't you, m'mselle. Well never mind. Once the sun has set, you'll see it happen before your eyes." Lisel stared and opened her mouth to remonstrate. Anna added gently: "And, I am afraid, not to myself alone."

Aside from all reasoning and the training of a short lifetime, Lisel felt the stranglehold of pure terror fasten on her. She rose and squealed: "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Anna, "that the liqueur you drank is made from the same yellow flowers I ate to give me the power of transmogrification. I mean that the wolf-magic, once invoked, becomes hereditary, yet dormant. I mean that what the goddess of the Wolfland conveys must indeed be paid for at the hour of death — unless another will take up the gift."

Lisel, not properly understanding, not properly believing, began to shriek wildly. Anna came to her feet. She crossed to Lisel and shook the shrieks out of her, and when she was dumb, thrust her back in the chair.

"Now sit, fool, and be quiet. I've put nothing on you that was not already yours. Look in a mirror. Look at your hair and your eyes and your beautiful teeth. Haven't you always preferred the night to the day, staying up till the morning, lying abed till noon? Don't you love the cold forest? Doesn't the howl of the wolf thrill you through with fearful delight? And why else should the Wolfland accord you an escort, a pack of wolves running by you on the road. Do you think you'd have survived if you'd not been one of their kind, too?"

Lisel wept, stamping her foot. She could not have said at all what she felt. She tried to think of her father and the ballrooms of the city. She tried to consider if she credited magic.

"Now listen to me," snapped Anna, and Lisel muted her sobs just enough to catch the words. "Tonight is full moon, and the anniversary of that night, years ago, when I made my pact with the wolf goddess of the north. I have good cause to suspect I shan't live out this year. Therefore, tonight is the last chance I have to render you in my place into her charge. That frees me from her, do you see? Once you have swallowed the flowers, once she has acknowledged you, you belong to her. At death, I escape her sovereignty, which would otherwise bind me forever to the earth in wolf-form, phan-

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tom-form. A bargain: You save me. But you too can make your escape, when the time comes. Bear a child. You will be mistress here. You can command any man to serve you, and you're tolerable enough the service won't be unwilling. My own child, your mother, was not like me at all. I could not bring her to live with me, once I had the power. I was troubled as to how I should wean her to it. But she died, and in you I saw the mark from the first hour. You are fit to take my place. Your child can take yours."

"You're hateful!" shrieked Lisel. She had the wish to laugh.

But someone was flinging open the doors of the hall. The cinnamon light streamed through and fell into the fire and faded it. Another fire, like antique bronze, was quenching itself among the pines. The dying of the sun.

Anna moved towards the doors and straight out onto the snow. She stood a moment, tall and amazing on the peculiar sky. She seemed a figment of the land itself, and maybe she was.

"Come!" she barked. Then turned and walked away across the park.

All the servants seemed to have gathered like bats in the hall. They were silent, but they looked at Lisel. Her heart struck her over and over. She did not know what she felt or if she believed. Then a wolf sang in the forest. She lifted her head. She suddenly knew frost and running and black stillness, and a platinum moon, red feasts and wild hymnings, lovers with quicksilver eyes and the race of the ice wind and stars smashed under the hard soles of her four feet. A huge white ballroom opened before her, and the champagne of the air filled her mouth.

Beautiful had knelt and was kissing the hem of her red cloak. She patted his head absently, and the gathering of the servants sighed.

Presumably, as Anna's heiress, she might be expected to live on in the forest, in the château which would be hers. She could even visit the city, providing she was home by sunset. In summer, she could stay for months at a time —

The wolf howled again, filling her veins with lights, raising the hair along her scalp.

Lisel tossed her head. Of course, it was all a lot of nonsense.

She hastened out through the doors and over the winter park and followed her grandmother away into the Wolfland.

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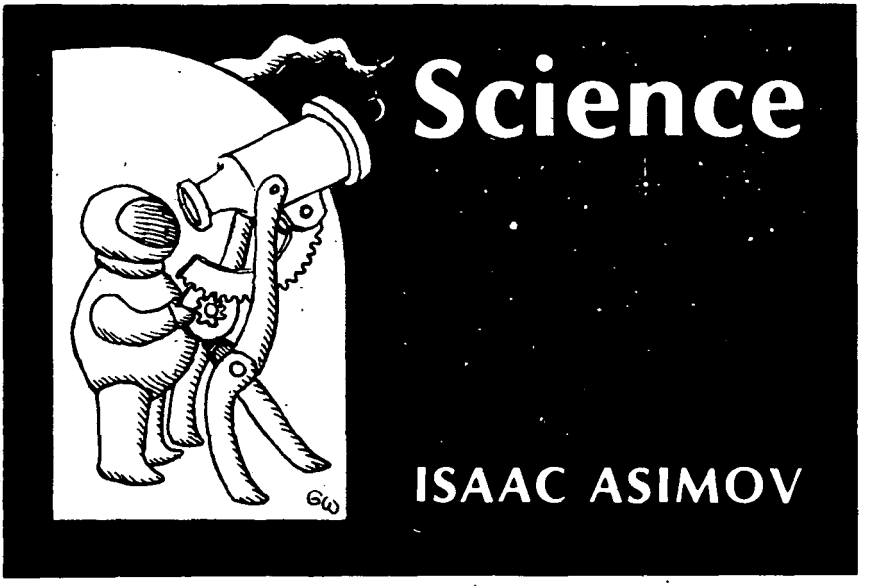

THE WORD I INVENTED

Robotics has become a sufficiently well-developed technology to warrant articles and books on its history, and I have watched this in amazement and in some disbelief, because I invented it.

No, not the technology; the word.

In October 1941, I wrote a robot story entitled "Runaround," first published in the March 1942 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, in which I recited, for the first time, my "Three Laws of Robotics." Here they are:

1. A robot must not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where those orders would conflict with the First Law.

3. A robot must protect its own existence, except where such protection would conflict with the First or Second Law.

These laws have been quoted many times by me in stories and essays, but what is much more surprising is that they have been quoted innumerable times by others (in all seriousness) as something that will surely be incorporated in robots when they become complex enough to require it.

As a result, in almost any history of the development of robotics, there is some mention of me and of the Three Laws.

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It is a queer feeling to know that I have made myself into a footnote in the history of science and technology for having invented the foundation of a science that didn't exist at the time. — And that I did it at the age of 21.

The Three Laws, and the numerous stories I have written that have dealt with robots, have given many people — from enthusiastic teen-age readers to sophisticated editors of learned magazines in the field — the idea that I am an expert on robots and computers. As a result, I am continually being asked endless questions about robotics.

What I will do, then, is write a question-and-answer essay on the subject. It will take care of just about all the major questions I am forever being asked and it should make it unnecessary for anyone to have to ask me any questions on the subject again.*

1. Dr. Asimov, how did you come to be such an expert in the field of robotics?

Alas, I am not an expert, and I never have been. I don't know how robots work in any but the vaguest way. For that matter, I don't know how a computer works in any but the vaguest way, either. I have never worked with either robots or computers, and I don't know any details about how robots or computers are currently being used in industry.

I don't take pride in this. I merely present it as a fact. I would like to know all about robots and computers, but I can only squeeze so much into my head, and though I work at it day and night with remorseless assiduity, I still only manage to get a small fraction of the total sum of human knowledge into my brain.

2. In that case, Dr. Asimov, how did you come to write so many robot stories, considering that you know nothing about the subject?

It never occurred to me that I had to. When I was reading science fiction in the 1930s, I came across a number of robot stories and learned what I had to know on the subject from them.

I found out that I didn't like stories in which robots were menaces or villains because those stories were technophobic and I was technophilic. I did like stories in which the robots were presented sympathetically, as in Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy" or Eando Binder's "I, Robot."

What's more, I didn't think a robot should be sympathetic just because it happened to be nice. It should be engineered to meet certain safety stan-

**But I am dreaming. The questions will continue, I know.*

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dards as any other machine should in any right-thinking technological society. I therefore began to write stories about robots that were not only sympathetic, but were sympathetic *because they couldn't help it.* That was my contribution to this particular sub-genre of the field.

3. Does that mean that you had the Three Laws of Robotics in mind when you began writing your robot stories?

Only in a way. The concept was in my mind but I wasn't smart enough to put it into the proper words.

The first robot story I wrote was "Robbie" in May 1939, when I was 19. (It appeared in the September 1940, *Super-Science Stories*, under the title of "Strange Playfellow"). In it, I had one of my characters say, about the robot-hero, "He just can't help being faithful and loving and kind. He's a machine — *made so.*" That was my first hint of the First Law.

In "Reason," my second robot story (April 1941, *Astounding*), I had a character say, "Those robots are guaranteed to be subordinate." That was a hint of the Second Law.

In "Liar," my third robot story (May 1941, *Astounding*), I gave a version of the First and Second Law when I said the "fundamental law" of robots was: "On no conditions is a human being to be injured in any way, even when such injury is directly ordered by another human."

It wasn't, however, till "Runaround," my fourth robot story, that it all came together in the Three Laws in their present wording, and that was because John Campbell, the late great editor of *Astounding*, quoted them to me. It always seemed to me that John invented those laws, but whenever I accused him of that, he always said that they were in my stories and I just hadn't bothered to isolate them. Perhaps he was right.

4. But you say you invented the term "robotics." Is that right?

Yes. John Campbell, as best I can remember, did not use the word in connection with the Three Laws. I did, however, in "Runaround" and I believe that was its first appearance in print.

I did not know at the time that it was an invented term. The science of physics routinely uses the "-ics" suffix for various branches: as in the case of mechanics, dynamics, electrostatics, hydraulics, and so on. I took it for granted that the study of robots was "robotics."

It wasn't until a dozen years later, at least, that I became aware that "robotics" was not listed in the 2nd edition of Websters' Unabridged Dictionary or (when I quickly checked) in any of the other dictionaries I con-

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sulted. What's more, when Websters' 3rd edition was published, I looked up "róbotics" at once and still didn't find it.

I therefore began saying that I had invented the word, for it did indeed seem to me that I had done so.

In 1973, there appeared "The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963," published by Harper & Row. It includes the word "robotics" and quotes a passage from an essay of mine in which I claim to have invented is. That's still just me saying so, but at least the lexicographers didn't cite earlier uses by someone else.

The word is now well established, and it is even used in the titles of magazines that are devoted to the technology of robots. To be candid, I must admit that it pleases me to have invented a word that has entered the scientific vocabulary.*

5. I frequently hear your robots referred to as "positronic robots." Why positronic?

When I first began writing science fiction stories, the positron had been discovered only six years before as a particle with all the properties of an electron except for an opposite charge. It was the first (and, at that time, still the only) bit of antimatter that had been discovered, and it carried a kind of science-fictional flavor about it.

That meant that if I spoke of "positronic robots" rather than "electronic robots," I would have something exotic and futuristic instead of something conventional.

What's more, positrons are very evanescent particles, at least in our world. They don't survive more than a millionth of a second or so before they bump into one of the electrons with which our world is crowded, and then the two annihilate each other.

I had a vision, therefore, of "positronic pathways" along which positrons briefly flashed and disappeared. These pathways were analogous to the neurons of the animal nervous system, and the positrons themselves were analogous to the nerve impulse. The exact nature of the pathways were controlled by positronic potentials, and where certain potentials were set prohibitively high, then certain thoughts or deeds became virtually impossible. It was the balance of such potentials which resulted in the Three Laws.

**"Psychohistory," which I also invented, has entered the scientific vocabulary, but, alas, not in the sense of my invention.*

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Of course, it takes a great deal of energy, on the subatomic scale, to produce a positron; and that positron, when it encounters an electron and is annihilated, produces a great deal of energy on the subatomic scale. Where does that positron-producing energy come from and where does the positron-annihilation energy go to?

The answer to that is that I didn't know and didn't care. I never referred to the matter. The assumption (which I didn't bother to state) was that future technology would handle it and that the process would be so familiar that nobody would wonder about it or comment upon it — any more than a contemporary person would worry about what happens in a generating plant when a switch is flicked and a bathroom light goes on.

7. Talking about the positronic energies reminds me, Dr. Asimov, to wonder where your robots got the energy to do their work. Where?

I assumed some form of nuclear power (or "atomic power") as we called it in the 1930's.

When I wrote my first robot story in 1939, uranium fission was just being discovered, but, of course, I had not heard of it yet. That, however, didn't matter. From about 1900 on, it was perfectly well understood that there was a source of huge and concentrated energy in the interior of the atom. It was standard "believe it or not" fare to be told that if all the energy in an ounce of matter could be extracted it would suffice to drive a large ocean liner across the Atlantic.

Consequently, the general science-fictional thought was that some very small object, serving as an "atomic energy device" could be inserted into a robot and that would keep it running for millions of years, if necessary.

As the years passed and we learned a great deal about the practical aspects of nuclear energy, I might have yielded to the headlines of the moment and spoken wisely of uranium fission and cadmium rods and so on, but I did not do so. I think I was right in this. I maintained silence about the details of the energy source because it had nothing to do with the point of the stories, and that caused no reader-discomfort that I am aware of.

8. In your earliest robot stories you made no mention of computers, yet surely the positronic brain is actually a very complex, compact, and versatile computer? Why did you not say so?

Because it never occurred to me to say so. I was a creation of the science fiction of the 1930's, which was written by writers who built on what had gone before.

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As it happened, the world of fiction had been full of humaniform objects brought to artificial life, including the Golem and Frankenstein's monster. There were also various "automatons" in human shape. Such things were in the air. Capek invented the word "robot" for them but the word was applied to a concept that long existed.

Computers, on the other hand, were not really in the air until the first electronic computer was built during World War II. Earlier mechanical calculating devices were so simple that they gave absolutely no birth to the thought of "thinking machine."

Since my robot stories began just before World War II, computers were not part of my consciousness, and I did not either talk or think of them. Yet even so I could not help introduce computers, even though I did not know what I was doing.

In my very first robot story, my little-girl heroine encounters a "talking robot" which "sprawled its unwieldy mass of wires and coils through twenty-five square yards." When it spoke there was "an oily whir of gears." I hadn't managed to work out the notion of electronics in its connection, but what I had was a kind of mechanical computer.

By the time I wrote my story "Escape" in November 1944 (it appeared in the August 1945, *Astounding* as "Paradoxical Escape"), I had another huge non-portable structure which I referred to as a "thinking machine" and called "the Brain." That was written about the time the first electronic computer, ENIAC, came into existence though, of course, I knew nothing about that.

Eventually, I did begin to write computer stories. I think the first of those was "Franchise," which appeared in the August 1955, *If*. Even then I never completely differentiated robots and computers and I feel I was right not to do so. To me, a robot was a mobile computer and a computer an immobile robot. From here on in then, when I speak of "robots" in this essay, please remember that I use it to include computers as well.

9. Come to think of it, why are robots humaniform? Surely that is not the most efficient shape.

Again, it's a matter of history. The robot is in the tradition of the "artificial man" which goes far back in the human imagination.

It is a matter of drama. What can be so supreme an achievement as to create an artificial human being — so that we have the mythical Greek inventor, Daedalus, constructing a brazen man, Talos, who served to guard the shores of Crete. Again, what can be so supreme a blasphemy as to at-

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tempt to mimic the Creator by devising an artificial human being, so that we have the hubris-and-até of Victor Frankenstein.

With such a background, science fiction writers were unable to think of intelligent machines without making them humaniform. Intelligence and the human shape seemed too intimately connected to be separated. It was only with the rise of the electronic computer, which presents a kind of artificial intelligence without the involvement of any fixed shape, that robots were seen as mobile computers and no longer had to be humaniform.

Thus, the very successful R2D2 in "Star Wars" was shaped like a fire hydrant, and seemed very cute in consequence, especially, for some reason,* to the female portion of the audience.

And if we step into the world of real robots, the kind that are being used in industry now, we have only the vaguest sign of humaniformity, if any at all. But then they are as yet very primitive and limited in the tasks they can perform. It is possible that as robots become more versatile and generalized in their abilities, they will become more humaniform.

My reasons for thinking so are two:

a) Our technology is built round the human shape. Our tools, our appliances, our furniture, are built to be used by human beings. They fit our hands, our buttocks, our feet, our reach, the way we bend. If we make use of robots with proportions like ours, with appendages like ours, which bend as we do, they can make use of all our tools and equipment. They can live in our world; they will be technologically compatible with us.

b) The more they look like us, the more acceptable they will be. It may be that one of the reasons that computers rouse such distaste and fear in many people who are otherwise normally intelligent is that they are non-humaniform and are therefore seen as a dehumanizing influence.

10. Well, then, when do you think we will have robots like those you describe, as intelligent and versatile, and subject to the Three Laws?

How can one tell? At the rate that computer technology is now advancing, it doesn't seem to me to be impossible that within a century, enough capacity and versatility can be packed into a device the size of a human brain to produce a reasonably intelligent robot.

On the other hand, technological capacity alone may well prove insufficient. Civilization may not endure long enough to allow robots to reach such a stage. Or even if it does, it may turn out that the social and psycho-

**It has been pointed out to me that R2D2 had a phallic appearance.*

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logical pressures against robots will prevent their development. Perhaps my feeling that humaniform robots will seem friendly will prove wrong. They may prove terrifying instead (something which I take for granted in my robot stories, by the way).

Then, too, even if the technological capacity is there and if social resistance is absent, it may be that the direction of technology will be different from that which I originally imagined.

For instance, why should each robot have an independent brain with all the expense and risk of damage that would entail?

Surely, it would make more sense to have some central computer be responsible for the actions of many robots.* The central computer in charge of a squadron of robots could be any size since it would not have to be portable, and, while expensive, it would certainly not be as expensive as a squadron of separate and very compact brains. Furthermore, the central immobile computer could be well protected and would not run the risk of the kind of damage that would always be possible in the case of mobile robot brains.

Each mobile robot would, we might imagine, have a characteristic wavelength to which it would respond and through which it would be connected to its own portion of the central brain. Without a brain of its own it could be risked in dangerous enterprises much more readily. The disadvantage would be that it would depend on electromagnetic communication that could be interfered with, perhaps, by both natural and technological means. In other words, a malfunctioning or nonfunctioning robot would then be much more likely.

11. Since you mention the possibility of a malfunctioning robot, how safe are the Three Laws anyway? They seem to be ambiguous. How do you define a human being? What do you mean by harm?

The Three Laws are deliberately ambiguous. From the very first time I used them in "Runaround," it was the ambiguity that supplied me with a plot. I considered the definition of "harm" as early as my story "Liar!" and in my novel *The Naked Sun* (Doubleday, 1957) I even dealt with robotic murder, despite the Three Laws.

As to how a human being was to be defined, that was something that now and then I thought of dealing with, but it was something from which I

*Such a possibilty is mentioned in my most recent robot story, "The Bicentennial Man" (Stellar Two, 1976).

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always shrank and turned away. Finally, I tackled that subject in "That Thou Art Mindful of Him" (F&SF, May 1974) and full-circled myself back into the Frankenstein complex.

It may have been partly in expiation for this that I went on to write "The Bicentennial Man." There I considered not only what a human being might be but what a robot might be, too, and ended by showing, in a way, their coalescence.

12. In "That Thou Art Mindful of Him," then, you forecast the replacement of human beings by robots, while in "The Bicentennial Man" you forecast the fusion of human beings and robots. Which do you think is the more likely of the two?

Perhaps neither.

I feel that not all intelligence need be equivalent. Suppose dolphins have intelligence that is comparable to ours, as some people think. Its evolution and its way of life is nevertheless so different from ours, that we seem to be able to meet on no common ground. Our respective intelligences seem to be so different in quality that there is no way of judging whether the dolphin is less advanced than we are or, possibly, more advanced, because there is no way of comparing them quantitatively.

If that is true in comparing the human being with the dolphin, how much more so might it not be in comparing the human being with the robot.

The human intelligence is the result of over three billion years of biological evolution, working through the processes of random mutation and of natural selection acting on systems of nucleic acids and proteins, with its driving criterion of success that of survival to the stage of reproduction.

The robot intelligence is the result, so far, of thirty years of technological evolution, working through directed human design and experiment acting on systems of metal and electricity, with its driving criterion of success that of usefulness for human purposes.

It would be very odd indeed, with every point so different in the two varieties of intelligence, if they did not end up very different — so different that no direct comparison is possible.

Robot intelligence seems to specialize in the scrutiny of tiny parts subjected to definite and repeated arithmetical operations with faultless accuracy and incredible speed. In that respect it far outmatches us already and may forever do so.

Human intelligence seems to specialize in an intuitive understanding of

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the whole and advances by the conjectural leap. In this respect we far outmatch the robot and may forever do so. After all, how can we program a robot to be intuitive if we do not know what it is that makes *us* intuitive?

Even if we could make the robot more like a human being, or vice versa, why should we want to? Why not take advantage of each area of specialization and make the robot ever better in its weighing of parts and the human being (through genetic engineering, eventually) ever better in its weighing of the whole.

We could then have a symbiotic arrangement, one in which the robot and the human being would be far greater together, than either could possibly be separately.

It was this which I was aiming at in my Lije Baley novels. *The Caves of Steel* (Doubleday, 1953) pictured a society in which human beings overbalanced the robots; *The Naked Sun*, one in which the robots overbalanced the human beings. The projected third novel of the series was to show the symbiotic balance — but though I tried, I lacked the ability to picture what was dimly in my mind.

I failed when I first tried in 1958 and I never quite felt I was up to it since. What a pity I didn't get to it while I was still in my twenties and had not yet grown wise enough to know there were things I lacked the ability to do —

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Bob Leman has, in the past several years, become one of F&SF's most valued and interesting contributors. His last story here was "Window," May 1980. Like many of his stories, this latest presses an inventive and chilling wrinkle into a realistic contemporary narrative, here concerning a black, dead lake in a northern Appalachian town.

Feesters In The Lake

BY

BOB LEMAN

Boneless pale creatures with ragged mouths full of teeth lived at the bottom of the lake. We called them *feesters*. My Uncle Caleb said we called them that because that was their name. He said they were once a family who lived in the abandoned big house beside the lake, and long ago something very strange happened to them, so that now they could live only down there in the darkness, in the cold mud.

Sometimes at night they would come in close to the shore, he said, and rise to the surface and cry. They cried like lost little children who have given up hope, a sound that was infinitely sad and desolate, a piteous sobbing that awakened in the hearts of unwary womenfolk a powerful desire to rescue and comfort. Those who succumbed to the desire were not heard of again. So Uncle Caleb told me when I was eleven.

I half believed him. Telling stories was one of his specialties. In those days I spent my summers in Sturkeyville with my grandparents, and all summer long I was in Uncle Caleb's company as much as he would allow. There were a good many reasons for that, and the most important one was my fear that I was going to miss a story if I strayed from his side. I was always glad I did not miss the one about the feesters.

Uncle Caleb had heard it, he told me, from his father, my Grandpa Scoggins, whose father had actually known Captain Feester and indeed had been his lawyer. The story went like this: Elihu Feester was a ship's master sailing out of Boston in the middle years of the nineteenth century. On one of his voyages, blown off course in the South Pacific, he made a landfall at a populated island that did not appear on the charts, and he and his crew were

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forced to spend some time there while they repaired their storm-damaged ship. There was apparently a quarrel of some sort with the natives, and the Americans fled the island, leaving behind a number of dead, both crewmen and natives.

They took with them, however, their doom: a germ or a parasite or perhaps a curse. Before they had completed their trading along the China Coast, Feester found it necessary to execute several of the crew. (This was not reported until much later, by the captain of another China trader.) No one knows what happened during the return voyage. The ship burned to the waterline a few miles outside Boston harbor on June 16, 1851, and only Captain Feester came ashore.

There was a great scandal, and a Board of Inquiry was called. Feester's story never varied: they were hardly out of the China Seas, he said, when the men began to fall sick, and one by one they died. The last leg of the voyage was accomplished with only himself, the second mate, and one able-bodied seaman left alive, and both of these had succumbed during the last days. He had no idea why he should have been spared. He had burned the ship because he was the only one left to do it, and most certainly his vessel had by then become a pest ship and might have infected the whole of Massachusetts. The bodies of the mate and the A.B. were still aboard at the time of the burning. He had nothing to add.

His story was highly circumstantial, a detailed account of high fevers and delirium, of black vomit and dreadful pain, of sores and pustules. He produced the ship's log in evidence. Nonetheless, he was not wholly believed. But because he had been half-owner of the ship, a vocal minority held that his arson had in fact been a praiseworthy and sacrificial act, and in the end he was absolved. It was clear that he would never be given command of another vessel, but that fact did not appear to cause him any concern, and indeed he was heard to say that once he was free to do so, he intended to go where he would never have to look at the sea again. He left Boston the day the board cleared him, and he had been gone for more than a year when the trader captain brought home his account of the killings Feester had committed off China. They talked of re-convening the board, but no one had any idea where Feester might be found.

He was, as it happened, far to the west in the town of Sturkeyville, a somnolent county seat in the northern Appalachians. He was building a house there, a few miles out of town near the shore of Howard's Lake. And by the time the house was completed he had acquired a wife to live in it, the only daughter of Ezra Stallworth, the banker who had sold him the land.

There was a crazy streak in the Stallworths, Grandpa Scoggins told Uncle Caleb, a stubborness that went

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far beyond anything rational, and Agatha Stallworth Feester's stubbornness had as much to do with the final horror as did the germ or parasite or curse or whatever it was that Feester carried. For a long time she persisted in a blind refusal to accept the fact that her children were what they were, and when at last there was no escape from the truth, it was too late.

Uncle Caleb's voice deepened dramatically at that point: "It was *toooo* late." Sepulchral, doom-laden. He enjoyed telling the story. It was plain, even to me, that he'd have preferred to be telling it at midnight in a room with shadowy corners, to a larger audience than one young nephew. But he was a story teller, and I had asked. I was getting the full performance.

It was impossible for me to tell whether or not he believed any of it. He put the same sincerity into all of his stories, both the demonstrably true and the obviously fictional. It is quite certain that on the day he told me about the feesters he did not yet know the whole story himself; it would be another five years before Grandpa Scoggins explained all the details to him and passed on the responsibility. What Uncle Caleb told me that day was simply the folklore of the town, and although I was too young to perceive it, I suppose there was a good bit of irony in his narration.

I was very fond of my uncle Caleb. He was thirty years old that summer (it was 1934), a bachelor, still making his home with my grandparents in the big house a block north of the square. He practiced law with my grandfather in chambers above Staub's Hardware, across from the courthouse. My grandfather owned the building. He owned a considerable part of the town, to tell the truth.

Uncle Caleb always had time to spare for me, and I appreciated it. I did not realize until a number of years later that he had plenty of time to spare, that he worked very little, if at all. There was no real reason why he should have, of course. He and my mother were the only children of their generation in the Scoggins family, and the deaths of several maiden aunts and great-aunts had settled upon Uncle Caleb all the money he would ever need. He was nominally a partner in the law firm, and I suppose he handled the odd conveyance or probate from time to time, but his chief occupations were those of a sportsman and man-about-town — if the term was applicable in Sturkeyville. He hunted and fished and rode his horses, and played a great deal of golf at the country club. He belonged to clubs in New York and Philadelphia, and he had kept in close touch with friends from prep school and undergraduate days. So he was often away, leaving the family to learn of his activities from the Society pages of the city papers.

My grandfather viewed Uncle Caleb's way of life with something less than enthusiasm, but the two of them

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did not, I believe, quarrel about it. I think that that was because Grandpa more or less agreed with Grandma's frequently expressed view that Caleb would in due course settle down like everybody else and that he deserved a little amusement to take his mind off what Dorothy Hodge had done to him.

What Dorothy Hodge had done to him was to marry Holmes Ungelbauer, his oldest and closest friend. She did not exactly jilt Uncle Caleb; there was never an engagement. There was not even an understanding, beyond the understanding the three of them had had since they were children, that some day she would marry either Holmes or Caleb. The three of them had been a close, closed triad almost from the time they were toddlers, musketeers who invariably snubbed any would-be d'Artagnan. They had their private jokes and private slang and private laughter at the efforts of their contemporaries in the town to copy their speech and dress and comportment. My mother always said that they were rotten little snobs during their teen years, but she was watching them from a six-year advantage in age, and I have a notion that in her time she may have been much the same.

I don't think they were snobs, exactly, but it would have been odd if they had not been aware of their position in the town. The Scogginses and Ungelbauers and Hodges were the three main families in Sturkeyville. The Scogginses had land and the bank, the Ungelbauers had coal, and the Hodges had the foundry. Scogginses and Ungelbauers and Hodges served together on the boards of the businesses and on the vestry of the church, and they tended to marry each other. But my grandparents' generation produced only four children: Holmes, Dorothy, my mother, and Uncle Caleb; and my mother astonished the town by marrying a young man from — of all places — Chicago. That left one marriageable daughter and two marriageable sons in The Families, and it was wholly taken for granted that Dorothy would marry one of the two.

In the event, she chose Holmes. I have no idea why. Family lore has it that she made her choice by flipping a coin, because she prized both young men equally. It could be true. It was said that up to the very day she announced her choice she had never given the slightest indication that she preferred Holmes to Caleb.

Uncle Caleb, as might have been expected (and as would have been expected of Holmes, had their positions been reversed) was wholly the good sport. He gave the couple, as a formal gift, an elaborate coffee service from Tiffany's, and, in addition, in recognition of the old comradeship, a facetiously inscribed silver cup. He stood as best man at the wedding, fulfilling his duties efficiently and with aplomb. He was the organizer of the housewarming party that welcomed the

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honeymooners home from Europe and into their new house on Wetzel Avenue. He became the very model of Old Family Friend.

But he had been more grievously wounded than anyone realized, and he changed. It was not quick or obvious, but after a time it became evident that some sort of spark had been extinguished or arrested, that he had elected, for a time at least, to become more spectator than participant. Although his demeanor did not alter perceptibly, those around him were aware of a certain detachment, of an ironical and sometimes almost sour amusement at most matters that would, under other circumstances, have been the chief concerns of his life. He declined to take serious things seriously. He pretended to an unchanged attitude, but he was not serious even about the pretense, and after a time he gave up pretending and frankly spent most of his time at play.

Thus he had plenty of time for me. He taught me the rudiments of golf that summer (it was now five years since the marriage), and a good deal about guns, and made of me an excellent rider, for my age. He owned three very fine hunters, and one of them, a bay mare grown placid with age, was temporarily mine. We spent a great many afternoons perfecting my seat and practicing low jumps, and at least once a week we would pack a lunch and spend the day on horseback, exploring the dusty back roads of the county. It was during one of these rides that he told me about the feesters.

We were riding that day up a disused road called Dexter Lane, a narrow strip of soft white dust that climbed crookedly through a forest of pin oak and locust to the three abandoned mountain farms it had once served. The day was hot, and we rode at a peaceful walk, to the agreeable sounds of slow hooves in the dust and birdsong from the branches.

My eye was caught by the entrance to a road that seemed even more sunken in desuetude than Dexter Lane. "Hey, Uncle Caleb," I sang out, "where's that road go?"

"That?" he said. "Why, that's the back road down to Howard's Lake."

"A lake? Can we go down there to eat our lunch? Can we, Uncle Caleb?"

He hesitated, and then said, "Why not?" We turned the horses in at the old road and began the descent. The road fell steeply, zigzagging in sharp switchbacks; I do not believe that a car could have negotiated it even in its best days. Years of erosion had cut a complicated system of foot-deep gullies, which sometimes followed the direction of the road and sometimes cut across it, so that we had to watch very carefully where the horses placed their feet. The trees grew more thickly here, their lowest branches spanned the road not far above our heads, so that we traveled in a twisting green tunnel. A silent tunnel, I suddenly realized: the normal small noises of the forest had

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unaccountably ceased. The only sound was the soft thud of hooves and the creak of our leather.

We emerged from the trees quite suddenly, into bright noon sunlight. We had come into a steep clearing, and from our position on its upper side we were looking over treetops down to the lake below and the house that stood beside it.

They were black. The lake lay like an irregular slab of polished anthracite, utterly black, utterly without motion, utterly lifeless except for the profusion of coarse hairy weeds that blanketed the hundred yards or so between the edge of the water and the edge of the woods. Across the lake the house rose from the weeds, a building disproportionately narrow and tall, topheavy somehow four stories high and two rooms wide. It was built of black stone, great heavy blocks that would perhaps have suited a manor house of ducal dimensions, but which, in this gaunt structure, conveyed an unpleasant sense of materials ill-used and weight wholly at variance with size. The weeds grew close all around it; there were no outbuildings. It towered in silent paradox there beside the black dead lake, grotesque and menacing.

"Boy," I said. "Boy. That's pretty spooky, Uncle Caleb. Who lived there?" I said "lived." It was clear that the house had been uninhabited for a long time. It was in excellent condition, though. No vandals had sported here.

"Feester," Uncle Caleb said. "Captain Elihu Feester. Shall we have our lunch now?"

We moved back into the shade of the outermost trees and tethered the horses, and then, as we ate our sandwiches and apples, Uncle Caleb told me what he knew or had invented about Elihu Feester and the feesters in the lake.

When Uncle Caleb told me a story, I never asked whether it was true or made up. It never occurred to me to ask how he had come to learn of Captain Elihu's disastrous voyage and all the events preceding his arrival in Sturkeyville, or how he was able to describe in such detail the grisly metamorphoses that were visited upon Feester's family. Fact or embroidery, it was all part of the story, part of the spell Uncle Caleb wove around me that day. Those poor doomed children came alive for me, they and their crazed mother, immured in the gloom of the locked and shuttered house, creeping with sticky sounds through the airless hot darkness of its hallways, struggling against the lure of the black waters of the lake just beyond the door. They were quite innocent, then, and so was their wretched mother, and even Captain Elihu was guilty of nothing more than theft from simple savages, an act not counted a great crime in those times.

That was what Feester had done, Uncle Caleb said. He had stolen treasure of some sort from the inhabit-

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ants of that remote South Sea island. And with the treasure he took, all unknowing, something dreadful: a curse, as the superstitious would have it, or, alternately, in the opinion of the more enlightened (among whom Uncle Caleb included himself), a microbe or enzyme or something else that would no doubt in due course be susceptible of scientific explanation.

Whatever it was, it turned human beings into something quite inhuman and thoroughly dangerous, and by the time Feester's travels brought him to Sturkeyville he had experienced things that might well have driven him into lunacy. Perhaps they had, but if so, he concealed it well. He arrived in town with style and élan, riding a spirited horse and bringing with him a heavy wagon driven by a burly man who carried a pistol in his pocket and never strayed more than a few feet from the wagon by day or night. Feester took a room in the hotel and began to explore the countryside, each day taking a different road out of town. Each evening he dined at the hotel and then entered the bar to spend a couple of hours drinking the famous local rye whiskey and conversing with the inquisitive regulars. He was genial enough, but conveyed a minimum of information: his name was Feester; he was retired; he was looking for a quiet place to settle down and enjoy his retirement; yes, he thought it might be here.

He extracted more information than he dispensed, and by the end of a week he had learned a good deal about the people of the town and the geography of the county. He had also, it transpired, selected a location for his house. One morning he turned up at the bank and spent several hours with Ezra Stallworth; before the day was out, he had duly recorded a deed to the old Phillips place, twelve hundred acres of steep forest land surrounding Howard's Lake. The town observed with interest Stallworth's respectful — indeed, almost obsequious — manner toward Feester and drew the obvious conclusion: Feester was very rich. It was said that he had paid spot cash in gold, counting off the coins from a heap dumped out of a heavy leather grip onto Stallworth's table, and that the pile was hardly diminished by removal of the substantial sum paid for the acreage. The rest of the gold, gossip had it, was left with Stallworth on deposit. It seemed likely. Certainly, from that day on, Stallworth became Feester's sponsor in the town, and, in due course, when Feester began to pay court to Agatha, Stallworth extended every possible encouragement. But then Stallworth would have encouraged Agatha to marry a toad, the town said, if the toad had enough money.

Feester continued to live in the hotel while the house was being built. The burly man left town, and the wagon stood empty behind the livery stable, its contents unloaded one night and hidden, presumably somewhere somewhere on the Phillips place. The

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house grew slowly and expensively beside the lake, much visited by Sunday-afternoon buggy riders who had heard rumors of its surpassing ugliness. It was finished at last, and wagon loads of furniture were moved into it, and on a rainy morning in April Agatha Stallworth, spinster, and Elihu Feester, bachelor, were united in holy matrimony at St. David's Church.

They were not a romantic couple. The bride was pushing thirty and had inherited the craggy Stallworth look, and the groom, two inches shorter and square in build, wore a seafaring beard that seemed to Sturkeyville to be more than a little raffish. But they appeared to be fond enough of each other, and they lost no time in populating the strange house by the lake with children, four little girls born by the time they had been four years married. Feester, in naming them, displayed an unexpected touch of classical learning: he called them Clio, Thalia, Urania, and Polyhymnia, causing a minor scandal by the outlandish names. By the time Polyhymnia was born, Clio had begun to change.

Because it was still there, the old curse or disease. If it was a disease, Feester was only a carrier, not subject to the symptoms but infecting those around him; and if a curse, then one that doomed him to remain free of the horror but compelled to watch as it destroyed first his crew, and now his family. Little Clio's sturdy legs, just coming fully under her control, and much used for running and jumping, became traitors; they bent at odd angles and would not support her weight. Her bones were softening; not just in her legs, but all the bones of her body, becoming not bone but flexible cartilage or baleen. Her small, even teeth fell out and were swiftly replaced by new ones, twice as many as she had had before, crooked, crowded and pointed, changing the shape of her softened jaw. Her skin turned deadly pale, and then a sick frog-belly white. Her legs began to fuse together, and her arms to fuse to her sides.

That was the beginning. It was to be several years before the change was complete, but it proceeded steadily and inexorably through all those years. Clearly, it moved more slowly in children than in adults; on the ship, as Feester's crew was stricken one by one, it had been only a matter of weeks from the first onset to full, feral metamorphosis, only weeks from the first weakness of the legs to the time when they slipped overboard to assume the life of the sea creatures they had become, or began to try to devour their shipmates and had to be shot.

Each of the children began at an age earlier than her next older sister; the baby Polyhymnia never in all her life had legs that could walk. Perhaps she was never in her life truly human. By the time Clio was six the change was equally advanced in all of them, and almost complete; they continued to grow, but they were now what they

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would be when they achieved full size. And they were probably already dangerous.

But Agatha never accepted that. Indeed, it remains a question whether she accepted even the fact of the changes that were occurring before her eyes. Her behavior suggests that she had removed herself entirely from reality. She seemed to believe that the pallid cylinders humping wetly across the floors of the dark house (dark because their great lidless eyes could not abide light) were still her four little girls, to be played with and sung to and tucked in at bedtime.

Feester no doubt attempted to reason with her, but there was no possibility that he could say anything capable of penetrating her madness. The more urgent he became, the more she perceived him as a monster, a Saturn bent upon the destruction of his own offspring. But some part of her understood quite well that there was absolutely no way for her to flee with these children, and she never attempted it; instead she created for herself a state of siege, setting up an ingenious system of barricades and locked doors that made a redoubt of the cellar and several ground-floor rooms. Here she lived in the dark in perpetual terror, lavishing love and tenderness upon the four small horrors that had been her children, crooning children's songs to them in the clammy blackness of a cave-like room in the cellar which had come to be their lair.

One can imagine a desperate Feester prowling at night through his part of the house, scourged by an absolute conviction that the creatures must be destroyed and simultaneously stretched on the rack of an agonized and hopeless grief for his lost children. He wept sometimes, it may be supposed, or raged incontinently and cursed God for allowing his ship to survive the storm. He temporized and procrastinated. And in the end he waited too long, and it was too late.

"It was *toooo* late," Uncle Caleb said and fell silent. It was a storyteller's trick. He was waiting for me to say, "Why? Why was it too late? What happened?" And of course I said it: "What happened?"

"Well, no one knows, really," he said. "Of course no one ever saw Agatha again. I think we have to conclude that they ate her. And then, it seems, they left the house and went into the lake, down into that black water, down to live in the mud where they were meant to live. *And there they live to this very day.*"

It was very dramatic, and very well done, and despite any theories about the proper setting for the narration of a spooky story, it seemed to me at that moment that I was in just exactly the right place to enjoy the maximum thrill from this one. Looking down at that blind, black house I found myself elaborating and enlarging upon Uncle Caleb's brisk summation of those last events, wondering whether Agatha, in

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her last desperate seconds, beset by greedy teeth, might have had a flash of bright, hard sanity and realized, in her moment of lucidity before the final darkness took her, that these were not — were not by any means — her children. And it seemed to me quite easy to visualize the flight after the feast: the silent opening of a ground-floor door and the faint gleam of four pale shapes in the darkness moving soundlessly across the weeds to slide without splashing into the black water. And in the house, silence.

We led the horses back up to Dexter Lane and mounted. Uncle Caleb said, "Shall we go on to the end of the road?"

"What's up there?" I asked.

"Three farms. All abandoned for, oh, forty years. Kraft, MacTavish and Love were the farmers. The Krafts and the MacTavishes are farming over in the valley now, but I don't know what became of the Loves. Nobody will farm those places any more. They've got a reputation for being hard-luck farms. Something to do with the feesters in the lake, I imagine."

"Aw, come on, Uncle Caleb. There aren't really any feesters, are there?"

He grinned. "Why, I think you'll have to make up your own mind about that one, Nick. But I'll tell you this: there was indeed a man named Elihu Feester, and he built that house and married Agatha Stallworth and had four daughters. And it's in the archives that Agatha and the four daughter disappeared. Feester reported to the sheriff that Agatha had taken the children and run away. Stallworth backed him up, and the story was accepted, if not necessarily believed in all quarters. As to the curse and monsters in the lake — a good many people in the county believe it."

"But you don't, do you, Uncle Caleb?"

He continued to grin. "I always keep an open mind, Nick. 'There are more things...' — you know the quotation. Who can say?"

By unspoken mutual consent we had turned the horses toward home. Being pointed toward the stables aroused thoughts of oats in their heads, and despite the heat they tended to insist on trotting. Even this unaccustomed liveliness in my old Salome did not wholly take my mind off the feesters, however, and after a while I said, "Well, I know stuff like that's just in stories. Or movies. Not in Sturkeyville."

"But you'd like to believe it, is that it?"

"Well, you know. The house and the lake. They're really spooky, boy. You can believe it when you look at them."

Uncle Caleb said, "They belong to your grandfather, you know. The house and the lake. They still call it the Phillips place. For some reason it never did get to be called the Feester place."

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"Grandpa? Grandpa owns it?"

"He does. And one of these days I'll own it."

"Gosh. Gosh. What'll you do with it, Uncle Caleb?"

"Why, nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. Except pay the taxes. That was your great-grandfather's arrangement with Captain Feester."

"Hey," I said. "Wait a minute. You never told me that part."

"So I didn't," he said. "I'll tell you now. A postscript, really." He paused. "Feester went away not too long after that. Went away, and wasn't seen or heard of again. He told your great-grandfather that he was accursed, that he would have to go where there were no people, and he needed legal advice before he went. The arrangement he wanted to make was this: he asked your great-grandfather to take the proper legal steps to insure that the house and the lake would stay undisturbed for as long as possible — forever, if that could be done. But there was no such thing as the modern trust in those days, and the law forbade entail. So there appeared to be no way to accomplish what he wanted. The upshot finally was that the two men shook hands on a gentlemen's agreement: Feester would deed the land to your great-grandfather in exchange for his word that the property would be kept in the Scoggins family in perpetuity, if possible, and that it would be kept forever undisturbed. The idea was that each Scoggins would deed the property to his eldest son as soon as the son was of responsible age and temperament, and that the sons were to be impressed with the importance of preserving things as they were.

"Some money went with the deal. Quite a lot of money, apparently. The Scoggins money dates from then. It seems that Feester's gold had arrived just in time to save Stallworth's bank from some sort of fatal default that had resulted from old Ezra's loony stubbornness, and Feester had taken a controlling interest in the bank in exchange. Your great-grandfather got Feester's stock in the bank, and Lawyer Scoggins was suddenly in the banking business. He was good at it too, and greedy, and he tended to keep properties he foreclosed. So by the time two or three panics had come and gone he owned a fair percentage of this end of the county. We still have most of it.

"And so in a few years your grandfather will be making a deed to me, and then it'll be my responsibility to see that everything is preserved intact. And to begin to think about what to do about the next generation."

He fell silent. I was riding a little in the lead, and I turned to look at him. On his face was an expression I had never seen him wear before, an expression, I now realized, of an emotion very close to despair. I knew, from overhead parental conversations, something about his loss of Dorothy Hodge, and I was able to make the connection between that and the re-

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mark about the next generation. I blurted, "You mean you're *never* going to get married, Uncle Caleb?"

The bleak look intensified for a moment and then disappeared, and he grinned again. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Nick. Time will tell. But if it should happen that I don't marry, I expect you've figured out that you're next in line. In twenty or thirty years I may well be deeding the place to you."

"I don't want it," I said, instantly and without having to think about it. "I don't want it."

That was during the summer of 1934. What Uncle Caleb had told me was, I have no doubt, all he then knew, or had heard, about the feesters. It was not until five years later that he learned something further, when, on his thirty-fifth birthday, Grandpa Scoggins handed him a deed to the Phillips place and told him the rest of the story. I was sixteen then, still spending my summers in Sturkeyville, and once every summer Uncle Caleb and I made the excursion up Dexter Lane and ate our lunch in the clearing. The house and the lake never changed at all from year to year, and even though I was five years older now, and (I firmly believed) reasonably sophisticated, the place still seemed pretty spooky. I said as much to Uncle Caleb.

"Yes," he said. "I want you to promise me something, Nick. Promise me that you'll never go down there. That you won't even come this far unless I'm with you."

I stared at him. He appeared to be perfectly serious. "You believe it!" I said, incredulously. "You believe there's feesters in there!"

"I didn't say that. I just said I don't want you going down there. I mean it, too."

And he did. His expression left no doubt about it. It was quite obvious that this was a matter he took very seriously. I said, "Well, sure, Uncle Caleb. Sure. I promise."

I was more than a little intimidated. He had never used that tone with me before. I was not wholly surprised, though. Each summer I was finding him a little changed; somewhat more detached, a bit gloomier, a touch more cynical. My mother and grandmother did a lot of worrying about him, although they simultaneously seemed to find a certain melancholy romantic satisfaction in his state of mind: "An old-fashioned broken heart," they said. For myself, I found it totally unsatisfactory; I wanted my old Uncle Caleb back.

Then Holmes Ungelbauer died. He died around Christmastime, suddenly, of pneumonia. He was a wiry polo player of thirty-six, the sort of person of whom it is said that he never had a sick day in his life; the fact of his death was difficult for the town to accept. He left no children, only his widow, the former Dorothy Hodge.

My grandmother's letters to my mother that winter as usual concerned themselves largely with Uncle Caleb

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and his state of mind, and we were easily able to infer from what she wrote that despite his undoubted grief over Holmes's death, a faint but perceptible improvement in his spirit was coming about. Within a year he was openly paying court to the widow, and during the summer after the courtship began — my last summer before going into the army — he was a different man altogether; he was, I think, very much like the young man who had lost Dorothy to Holmes ten years before, the young man I did not remember because I had been too young when it happened. He was playful and funny and his ironies had lost their bitter edge. He was a happy man, a man who clearly believed he was going to recover a thing of value that he had given up as forever lost.

He did not get it, of course. He had bad luck, Uncle Caleb. I was in the army by then, and my mother's long, chatty letters, reaching me in Fort Benning and Camp Shelby, and then in a series of forlorn places in Western Europe, kept me up to date (more up to date than I thought really necessary, to tell the truth) on events in Sturkeyville. The villain was a man named Willing, Otis R. Willing. At any rate my mother and grandmother thought of him as a villain. But then Dorothy was someone they had always known, and Willing was a newcomer, and so it was natural of them to assign the guilt (if guilt there was) to him, not to her.

He was vice-president and general superintendent at the foundry, a big, serious engineer from Purdue or perhaps Michigan State, a former Bright Young Man at Big Steel, who had been lured away by a challenge to put the moribund Hodge Brothers Foundry back on its feet. He had burst violently into the musty corridors of the old firm a few years before, an expensive expert with a reputation to uphold and a fierce joy in his work. He began with a merciless pruning of deadwood, ridding the offices of a puttering horde of routine-bound functionaries who had long since ceased to do any productive work, but who, by tradition, had every reason to believe they would remain on the payroll until at last their infirmities precluded even token appearances at work. He turned then to the denizens of the executive wing and found that he could not depose them; they were, after all, members of the family. But he bypassed them ruthlessly, so that within a few months they were left as functionless ornaments in their elegant offices, free to practice their putting on the carpet or gather together for futile indignation meetings or otherwise fill pointless days. Their responsibilities were assumed by men who came with Willing, men like himself, competent, assured, socially graceless, and, by Sturkeyville's standards, without backgrounds. They came with their prairie accents and degrees from unknown colleges and re-

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made the plant; well before the arrival of the fat contracts of the war the foundry was moving steadily toward profitable operations.

An executive position in the foundry carried with it a social position in the town; Willing was immediately and automatically a member of the country club and the hunt (a purely honorary membership; he did not ride at all) and was invited to take his lunches at the round table at the Updegraff Hotel. If he had had a wife she would have been asked into the Hospital Guild and the Bridge Whist Society. But he had no wife, and that lack made it difficult to fit him into social life at the level of his entry. There was, furthermore, a whiff of wickedness about his reputation: Fred Ungelbauer, who sat on boards of directors in Pittsburgh, had brought back rumors of a mistress of long standing, and that, together with his age (he was probably about forty), set him somewhat apart from the manageable classification of Eligible Bachelor. But, although it was an awkward situation, it was not a real problem because for the first couple of years he appeared quite literally to have no time for anything but his work. Then he married the widow Ungelbauer, and there was no longer any question about his place in the scheme of things.

They presented the town with a *fait accompli*. One Monday morning Wetzel Avenue awoke to see Willing's car parked in Dorothy's driveway. The street watched avidly until Willing emerged from the house and drove off to the foundry, and then it began to telephone Dorothy. By noon the whole town knew that they had been married on Saturday in a county seat a hundred miles away.

I never learned where Uncle Caleb heard the news, or what his initial reaction was. He was not the sort of man who displayed emotion in public, and he may have managed not to show what he felt. But the shock must have been enormous. He had lost Dorothy again, and not only lost her, but lost her to a man who could never have entered his head as a rival, a man he would have thought of only as hired help, a worthy person, no doubt, but not the sort who had any right even to dream of someone like Dorothy. I think I understood Uncle Caleb's mental processes pretty well, and it seems to me that this action of Dorothy's — this action that he surely at first flatly disbelieved — must have been a humiliation almost beyond bearing. When he lost her to Holmes he lost her to an equal. But Otis R. Willing — ah, that was humiliating.

In November I stepped on a land mine in a vinyard above the Moselle, and by Christmas I was in the hospital in Baltimore, with a right leg that was going to be a permanent problem, but comforted by the knowledge that I would never again have to spend my

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days and nights in a frozen hole. My parents came, and my mother cried over me for a time, and got over it, and then cried again when I asked about Uncle Caleb. When she left the room to seek a vase for the flowers she had brought, I put the question to my father.

"He's in bad shape, Nick," he said. "Drinking hard. Turning into a hermit. He moved out of grandpa's house a year ago, and he's living alone in the country with his horses. He's fixed up an old farmhouse out by Howard's Lake, and even your grandparents don't see him more than once a month. It's bad."

It was indeed. Not long after V-J Day I finally got back to Sturkeyville, and on the second day of my visit I borrowed grandpa's car and drove up to the end of Dexter Lane, where Uncle Caleb had set himself up in the old Kraft farmhouse. I was appalled. Although he had not in fact changed in appearance very much, nor become dirty and slovenly, as I had half expected, he had undergone a change of character. Or of personality, at least. His old detachment and gentle irony had soured and curdled and become an unnerving blend of pessimism and cynicality. I found myself almost disliking him. We sat in the big room he had created by knocking out all the first-floor walls except those of the kitchen, and I listened to his bitter commentary with sorrow and incredulity. He had reached the point of viewing all accomplishment — including the war just ended — as futile and pointless; all human effort, in his black view, was inspired by sordid and ignoble motives; all human beings were knaves, and women were the worst of the lot. Not that they were entirely wicked and malicious, he said; they were simply empty and thoughtless and without character, and hence easily susceptible of being led by evil men into discreditable behavior. And such men were the basest and lowest of our low race.

I knew he was talking about Willing, and he knew I knew, and soon he began to use the name. He had been drinking pretty steadily, and as his rage and resentment fed upon themselves his speech began to lapse into incoherency. I was a little frightened, and I tried — as I had been trying all afternoon — to change the subject.

"What do you hear from your neighbors down at the lake?" I said.

"Neighbors?"

"The feesters. They're your neighbors now, aren't they?"

He gave me a startled, suspicious glare. "The feesters? What do you know about the feesters?"

"Why, I know all about them," I said. "You told me yourself. Five-foot aquatic maggots with sharks' mouths. Members of the local gentry until The Curse of Hoog, Fish-God of the South Seas, fell upon them. Named for selected Muses. I've always wanted to meet a maggot named Polyhymnia."

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His face changed expression several times as I spoke, altering from suspicion to anger, and then to an odd combination of fear and something akin to smugness. "Careful, there, Nick," he said. "Be careful. Don't make fun of things you don't know anything about. You might be sorry."

"Now what the hell does that mean? 'Might be sorry.' You mean the feesters might come and eat me?"

"You might be sorry."

"Oh, for God's sake," I said. I felt sick. He was deadly serious. This was not just drunken maundering, it was lunacy. I shouted at him: "For God's sake, Uncle Caleb, what are you talking about?"

"Never mind," he said. "Never mind. Believe what you like. Call it what you like. Just stay away from Howard's Lake, that's all."

And that was all I got out of him. I had to report to my grandparents not only the total failure of my attempt to lure him back to real life, but also my conviction that it was hopeless to try. He had, to put it simply, gone off his head; I saw nothing to do but wait, and hope for some sort of recovery. I was very wise at that time, with a far greater certainty of the answers to hard questions than I possess today, and it was perfectly clear to me that a man who believed in ancient curses and monsters at the bottom of the local lake was, *ipso facto*, insane. But I thought it was only temporary, a consequence of preserving into advanced age (he was over forty) emotions that were seemly only in the young. It had been, to be sure, a bitter experience for him, to lose Dorothy twice; but I myself had loved and lost, and recovered very nicely, and I saw no reason why Uncle Caleb, an older man whose feelings could not possibly be as deep as mine had been, should not show an equal resilience in recovering from his geriatric infatuation.

Then he lost her for the third time. That is how he saw it, at any rate. It might plausibly be argued that in none of the three cases had he lost her, because he had never in fact had her. But when she was once more widowed, he allowed himself a certain amount of hope again, and when that small hope was extinguished, he went irretrievably over the edge.

It had been a foolish hope, to be sure. Dorothy had rejected him twice and apparently had been entirely contented through all the years with Holmes and Willing. After Willing's murder and the attendant turmoil and publicity, no reasonable person could have expected her to stay in Sturkeyville and take up with Uncle Caleb. But Uncle Caleb was by then very far indeed from a reasonable person.

He was a suspect in the murder. The prime suspect, the only suspect, really, except for the general fear of a vagrant madman. As it happened, Uncle Caleb was investigated and absolved almost immediately, and the crime was generally believed to have been

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the work of an insane hobo, who had probably caught the next freight train out of town. The case went down on the books as an unsolved murder. And the town went in fear.

Their fear was quite sensible; it had in truth been an atrocious crime. Willing had been working late that night, as was his habit. He was building an entirely new plant for the foundry, south of town in the direction of the lake, and the last weeks before production was to begin were hectic in the extreme. A night watchman saw him leaving the building at about eleven o'clock. It was a night of torrential rain, and water had shorted out some of the new wiring, so that there were no lights in the parking lot. Willing's was the only parked car.

The watchman's later testimony was that he had heard what he thought might be a scream, coming faintly through the roar of the rain. He went immediately to the door that gave onto the parking lot, and peered out. He could see nothing. He ran (as fast as he could; he was an old man) to his cubicle for the flashlight he should have been carrying. He threw its beam out into the parking lot. Then he stood frozen in the doorway for a little time, retching and trembling. When he was able to overcome his paralysis, he ran (faster this time) to the telephone.

The sheriff was an experienced lawman who had seen his share of grisly sights, but he admitted afterward that he had been shaken by what had been done to Willing. "Get the tarp, for God's sake," he said to a deputy. "Jesus Christ. I never saw anything like that. That's crazy." He stopped. "Crazy," he said. "Caleb Scoggins, by God. That's Otis Willing, there. Got to be Scoggins. We'll just go out there and get him. Keebler, you stay here till the meat wagon comes. Stark, you come with me. By God, we'll beat him home."

They slipped and slewed up Dexter Lane through the downpour. "No car's been down this road," the deputy said. "Not a track."

"He went down before the rain started."

"That was early this morning," the deputy said.

"He walked, then. Or rode his horse. Watch what you're doing."

The Kraft house faced the end of the road, and the headlights lit up its front. There was no sign of life. The deputy swept about with the spotlight. "Nobody's used the front door," he said. "Not a track."

"You take the flashlight and go around the house," the sheriff said. "I'll watch the front."

The deputy disappeared into the rain. He was back in a few minutes. "Nobody's been in or out since it started raining. Not a human track. Looks like maybe a dog dragged something through. But no Caleb Scoggins."

The sheriff felt a sense of triumph, as he never failed to mention when he

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told about it. "I figured I had him, then," he said. "I figured to hide the car in the woods, and then me and Stark would lay low till he got there. I thought he'd probly come back over the hills and wouldn't see the car tracks. And right then, by God, was when the front door opened, and there stood Caleb in his pajamas, blinkin' in the headlights."

So Uncle Caleb was cleared, and the town was left with the mad hobo theory and went in fear at night. Dorothy was not one of the fearful: she left town immediately and never came back, except many years later, to be buried. I suppose there were too many memories of tragedy in the town for her to stay, but her flight also served to save her from the terrors of the next few years. Because there were more murders.

Two of them, both crimes of the most appalling gruesomeness. There was a disappearance as well, which added to the general disquiet, although it appeared to have nothing to do with the murders. But then it was a frightened town in those years, apprehensive of the darkness and suspicious of strangers. The sensational press had a feast, spreading the story of the Sturkeyville Butcher from coast to coast and seizing the opportunity to recount once more the stories of Jack the Ripper and other mass murderers.

And Uncle Caleb, bereft now for the third time, disintegrated rapidly, crawling further into the bottle and wholly abandoning any effort to live a life of normal sociability. News of him came from Mattie Helms, my grandmother's housekeeper and my old friend, who was my only corespondent in the town since my grandfather's death and my grandmother's stroke. Mattie wrote, "Well Nick you would not believe your Uncle Caleb, I think the poor man has left his senses entirely, he does not wash and is very dirty and drunk. It is safe to say that Dorothy Hodge has a lot to answer for but God will judge. Now he has left the Kraft farm, he has moved to the old Feester house by Howards lake which is said by the country people to be haunted as I guess you know. It is almost a hundred years since anyone lived there, what it must be like inside I can not imagine. I wish you and your mother would come Nick and see if you can help him."

But I saw no way to help him, and indeed I was beginning to have certain small doubts about wanting to. The suspicions that nagged at me were of course unmentionable; I hardly let myself think about them, let alone discuss them with anyone else. It seemed to me, though, that I could read the same fear between the lines of Mattie's letter, and my mother's near-hysteria when Uncle Caleb's troubles were discussed seemed perhaps a touch excessive even for concern about a beloved brother's disintegration. Mother and Mattie were, of course, no more anxious to put their dread into words than

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I was, and we all kept our own counsel.

What troubled us was this: we had, reluctantly and unwillingly, been forced to conclude that all three of the murdered men stood in a relationship to Uncle Caleb that might have seemed to him — given the decrepit state of his mentality — to be inimical: first Willing, the contemptible man who had snatched away Dorothy and exposed Uncle Caleb to ridicule; then Gunther Hodge, who had brought Willing to Sturkeyville; and then Stark, the young deputy who had come to arrest him on the rainy night of Willing's death. These were not pleasant thoughts. But the person who had disappeared could in no way, I was grateful to note, be connected to Uncle Caleb: she was Wanda Karsky, a seventeen-year-old miner's daughter with a reputation for wildness, and no one but her parents thought there was much of a mystery about her disappearance. The consensus was that she had run off with a man and would end up on the street of a big city.

But the murders were a continuing occasion for brooding and black speculation. What could not be said aloud festered at the back of my mind, and no matter how much I tried to persuade myself that my conjectures maligned Uncle Caleb most grievously, and that he was, after all, hurting no one but himself by his lunacy, I remained prey to grim suspicions. And, although not a word was spoken, I think my mother, to some degree, had the same apprehensions.

The result was that for a long time I did not go to Sturkeyville. My mother visited my grandmother from time to time, but not nearly as often as she would have done under other circumstances, and she never saw Uncle Caleb at all. During this time I completed law school and became a minor cog in a very large firm on LaSalle Street. I acquired a wife, and a house in Winnetka, and a son. Then my grandmother died, and I went to Sturkeyville again after all the years.

Uncle Caleb came to the funeral, an apparition that bore only a remote resemblance to the Uncle Caleb of old. It seemed to me now that he was hopelessly lost. He was emaciated and slovenly in his dress, of course, and afflicted with strange tics; but that was not what was ultimately disquieting. It was his face. His eyes, especially, were strange. He held them open to their utmost, in a round, unblinking stare that seemed to be focused on something other than his surroundings. He held his mouth so that his lips were drawn into thin lines, keeping his teeth always partially exposed. And he was pale, pale beyond belief, with a dead-white, shiny, almost translucent pallor that was faintly disgusting.

"You need more sun, Uncle Caleb," I said. "You're looking kind of bleached."

"Sun," he said. "I don't go out in the sun much. Bothers me. Stay inside

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most of the time. Too bright right now." It was in fact a dull December day, the sun a watery, weak disc behind a thin cloud cover. "Oh, much too bright," he said. His eyes were turned toward me, but the focus of his enormous stare seemed to be somewhere to my rear. "I'm living out at the Feester house now, you know, Nick," he said. "As soon as all this is over, I want you to come out there with me. Will you do that?"

"Sure, Uncle Caleb," I said. It was exactly what I wanted. I believed that I had puzzled out some of the answers, and I wanted to talk to him, to have the thing out, to satisfy myself that my ugly ideas were only black fictions. I was quite ready, now, to accept my uncle as a harmless lunatic, but the idea of homicidal mania had to be laid to rest.

The coffin was lowered into the grave. The ritual words were said, and everyone hurried to the waiting cars, grief suspended for the moment in the sheer discomfort of the day's bitter cold. The undertaker had assigned Uncle Caleb and me to the same car. My wife was not with me; she had given birth to our second son five days before and was snug at home in Winnetka. In the car he said, "You'll have to drive me back to the lake. I don't have a car that will run any more. Hostettler sent one of these things out to get me this morning." Hostettler was the undertaker.

Sturkeyville still favored funeral baked meats, and there was no way to avoid the customary luncheon at the house, an enormous heavy meal catered by the ladies of the Moravian Church. Uncle Caleb was not at table; he had disappeared upstairs, where, it transpired, he had hidden a bottle, perhaps years before. After everyone had eaten too much and departed, and Mattie Helms and my parents and I were sitting over a final cup of coffee, he appeared suddenly in the doorway. "All right, Nick, let's go," he said.

"Oh, Caleb," my mother said, "I *did* want to talk to you. It's been so long."

"Next time, next time. Come on, Nick." He was swaying in the doorway, glaring with that great round stare at some indeterminate point behind us, a scarecrow figure in a wrinkled expensive suit that was now several sizes too large for him. I seemed to have no choice. I said, "OK, Uncle Caleb. Let's go."

And so at last I found myself entering the Feester house. We drove in by the lower road, which came within a mile of the lake. The driveway in from the road, impassable for half a century, had been cleared and repaired, but it remained crooked and pitted and had to be negotiated slowly. I concentrated on my driving. The driveway ended abruptly, after making a sharp, steep turn around a limestone embankment, and we were suddenly out of the trees and facing the house.

The years had not improved it: it

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stood there among the frozen weeds with the same suggestion of paradox and seedy menace I had felt looking at it from the hillside long ago. It loomed blackly above us against the gray sky, top-heavy and brutal, a shuttered receptacle of old tragedy. Smoke was coming out of one of the gaunt chimnies, a human touch that compounded the paradox. I shivered and said, "Jesus, Uncle Caleb. How come you live out here?"

"Why, it's mine," he said. "Where else would I live?" He seemed to think that the answer was responsive. "Come on," he said. "It's cold out here."

It was anything but cold in the house, at least in the front ground-floor room where he lived. A great cast-iron stove, its pipe plugged roughly into the chimney above the mantel of the old fireplace, was pouring out heat in suffocating quantities. We entered into an oppressive unclean atmosphere of human odors long sealed in an overheated room, a staleness of unwashed bedding and a hermit's cooking utensils. It was pitch-black after the front door closed behind us, and Uncle Caleb led me by the arm into the room and struck a match and lighted an oil lamp. The bloom of yellow light illuminated a shadowy confusion of bulky furniture, with all the paraphernalia of his life scattered upon and among it in incondite heaps: groceries, tools, books, bottles and trash, indiscriminately piled together on table and chairs and floor. The bed in the corner was in shadow; I could not tell whether the welter upon it was part of the same rancid accumulation or only bedclothes long unchanged. I felt a little queasy.

"Have a seat, there, Nick," he said. "I'll stoke up the stove and fix us a drink. I've got some things to tell you. It's time, now." His face seemed to float at the edge of the shadows, the great round eyes staring out of it at something behind me. "That chair there," he said. "Just throw the stuff on the floor." I did as he commanded, but my skin crawled a little when I sat. I refused the drink; nothing could have induced me to put my lips to anything in that room.

"Now, first of all, I've got this for you," he said. He passed me a sheet of paper. I took it with extreme reluctance. I knew very well what it was, but I held it to the light and confirmed it: a warranty deed to the Phillips place.

"Uncle Caleb, I told you twenty years ago I don't want it," I said. "The old promise has been kept long enough. If it was ever made at all. Sell the place, or let the county take it for taxes. This house ought to be torn down."

He paid no attention. "It's your responsibility now, Nick. A sacred trust. Family honor and all. You're bound to keep everything intact. Keep it intact and deed it to one of your sons. And set up a trust in your will to preserve it

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for as long as the law allows, in case you die before you can make a deed. I want your word. Your oath."

"Just a minute," I said. "Hold on. I said I didn't want it. I meant it. I'm going to put this thing in the stove. I see it hasn't been recorded, so that will be the end of it."

An expression of really appalling viciousness came over the pale face, and his voice went to the edge of a scream: "You will not. You will accept your responsibility. You are responsible now for four lives. You cannot cast that off."

"My God," I said. "You mean the feesters."

"Why, yes," he said, his voice suddenly quite reasonable. "Of course, the feesters. What else do you think this is all about?"

I took a deep breath. "Uncle Caleb," I said, "let's drop this bilge about the feesters. They're a campfire story to scare boy scouts with, and we both know it. But I do believe you're serious about wanting to keep the place intact and in the family, and I think I've figured out why. Shall I tell you?"

He gave me a sly look. "You're wrong, you know. The feesters are down there, all right. But go ahead. Tell me what you think."

"Here's how I've pieced it together," I said. "This isn't about superstition or curses and slimy things in the lake. It's about murder and conspiracy and scandal. The murders and conspiracy are a century old, now, but in Sturkeyville the scandal would be as fresh as ever, Sturkeyville being what it is.

"What I think, Uncle Caleb, is that our money — the Scoggins fortune — was founded on blackmail. I think that Elihu Feester murdered his wife and children and was caught or discovered by a couple of pillars of the community — one of them his own father-in-law — who proceeded to strip him of everything he had and then sent him off, a beggar threatened by the hangman.

"What did he have in that wagon of his? More gold coin, maybe, maybe a big box of it. What'll you bet Great-Grandpa and Ezra Stallworth got that, too? And then Great-Grandpa beat Stallworth out of his share, somehow, and got the bank as well.

"But the bodies were buried somewhere here on the Phillips place. I don't think they'd have been put in the lake, because sunken bodies have a way of surfacing eventually. The bodies were buried here, and since their discovery would raise the hue and cry for Feester, who could be expected to talk if taken, they took steps to prevent any discovery. Great-Grandpa bought the place and saw to it that it stayed wild and untenanted. He may even have started the story of the curse and the feesters.

"I guess he must have told Grandpa all about it when he deeded the place over, and impressed on him the importance of keeping those bodies hidden.

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Feester no doubt would have been dead by then, but the discovery of the bodies — or skeletons, I suppose — would have raised a lot of questions. There must be no scandal. No, indeed. The Scoggins were one of the First Families. Think what Sturkeyville would do with a juicy morsel like that.

"And then it was your turn, Uncle Caleb, and you continued everything just as it was before, and now you want me to take over. Well, I won't. I don't suppose the events were exactly as I've put them together, but it has to be something like that, and I want no part of it. Scandal won't bother me. I don't live in Sturkeyville, and everybody's got a thief somewhere in his ancestry. Anyhow, everybody involved in this thing has been dead for a long, long time. So I'll say it again: I don't want title to this place. I won't take it."

I was aware that my voice had become very loud and that it shook a little. I leaned forward to peer at him, searching for a clue to the effect of my thunderous pronouncement. And Uncle Caleb tittered.

I am not sure what I had expected, but it was most certainly not that. He tittered and said, "Nick, you're crazy," — which, under the circumstances, struck me as grimly comical. "Do you really believe the reason we've got to save this place is just to prevent gossip?" he said. "Who cares about that? I tell you the feesters are alive under the ice down there. They're alive and they've got to be kept a secret. You've got to see that."

He was passionately sincere, poor lunatic. I said, "Why, Uncle Caleb? Why do they have to be kept a secret?"

"Why, because they're dangerous," he said. "They kill people. They've done some really awful things these last few years. They've got to be watched. But if anybody finds out about it, they'll come down and destroy them."

"Well, why not?"

"Why not? Why not? Because it would be murder, that's why not."

"But they're murderers themselves, aren't they? And not even human?"

He answered quickly and glibly: "Oh, they're not responsible. It's their nature. You couldn't call it murder. Anyhow, they've only killed people who deserved it. If you look at it right, they actually ought to be thanked."

"You're talking about Otis Willing, aren't you? And Gunther Hodge and Tom Stark?"

"Yes, yes. Nobody could say *they* were any great loss to anybody. Oh, the feesters knew what they were doing. They're amazing, really. Justice is what they're interested in."

I had to pursue it to the end. "And how about Wanda? Wanda Karsky?"

He did not answer immediately. "Well," he said at last, "That one surprised me. The feesters didn't even know her. It's kind of a puzzle. But I'll tell you what I think. I think maybe they've begun to like it, that maybe sometimes they can't help themselves.

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That's why they've got to be watched. But don't you worry. I'll watch them. And when I'm gone, you'll have to do the watching. You see that now, don't you?" He sounded, suddenly, frightened and vulnerable.

For better or worse, I made a decision at that moment. I cannot say that I take any pride in it or that it shows a proper and responsible regard for the public weal; but my suspicions were still only suspicions, and he was my uncle and had been the light of my boyhood. I told myself that he was physically in very bad shape, that he could hardly have very long to live, and that to harass a dying man for something that was probably only a creation of my own imagination would be unforgivable. And it is quite possible — little as I care to admit it — that the fear of scandal, which I had just been deriding so strenuously, was the critical influence.

At any rate, I elected at that moment to take no action. I said, "All right, Uncle Caleb. I'll keep the deed. And you keep watch on the feesters. You watch them very carefully, very carefully indeed. Because if they ever get loose and harm someone, I promise you it will be the end of them, and a pretty terrible end, too. Do you understand me? Do you grasp what I'm saying?"

"Oh, I do, Nick, I do," he said. "You don't have to worry about it. I'll be all right. From now on they'll stay in their place, down there in the mud where they belong. I'll see to that. And I'm glad you've decided to do your duty and take on the ownership. I knew you would, of course. You've never been one to shirk your responsibilities. I guess that takes care of everything. You can leave, now."

And that was that. We did not even shake hands. I heard the slam of the door and a clash of bolts behind me, and I stood on the step and took great breaths of the cold air, clearing from my lungs the fog of Uncle Caleb's noisome den. Then I drove back to town and told my mother some lies: that Uncle Caleb was living quite comfortably out there at the lake; that he was neither as drunken nor as crazy as we had supposed; that we need have no fear about his future behavior; and that he had sent his love to her. I think she half believed me, because she wanted to.

Back in Chicago the old suspicions continued to nag at me, augmented, I must admit, by stabs of conscience and an uneasy conviction that I had made a tragic error. But the months passed, and then the years, and no dire news came from Sturkeyville. I decided at last that I had after all been right. Uncle Caleb and his troubles became, with the passage of time, matters that I thought about only occasionally, and then not for long. Those rare occasions came when my mother entertained visitors from Sturkeyville, who would, at

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her delicate but ruthless insistence, reluctantly tell what they knew about how things were now with Uncle Caleb.

They always brought an account of a deteriorating situation, describing a hermit committed to the absolute extreme of solitude, a man upon whom no one had laid eyes for several years. The house and the lake remained inviolate, carefully avoided by the populace. Twice a year, perhaps, the sheriff would send a deputy to ascertain that the hermit Scoggins was still alive. The deputy would thunder at the door until he heard a voice from inside; having heard it, he would report to the sheriff that the nut still lived, and that would be Uncle Caleb's sole contact with the outside world until the next official visit. It was not a reassuring state of affairs, but no one doubted that it was better than having him locked away.

Then one day I saw on an inside page of the *Tribune* a story with a Sturkeyville byline that instantly collapsed my rickety defense against facing the truth about Uncle Caleb. Another murder had been committed, an atrocity as bad as the rest. As I read, I realized that I had been expecting it and that I had, without realizing it, already made plans. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I arrived in the late afternoon. The lake was not frozen, now, and the weeds were green, and yet the house seemed even more forbidding than on the gray, bitter day when I had seen it last. There was absolutely no sign that any human being had ever been here, except for the fact of the house itself. I beat on the door, first with the heel of my fist and then, when that had no result, with a stone. The noise was great.

After a time there was a voice from the other side of the door. "Get out!" it said. "Go away!"

"It's me, Uncle Caleb," I shouted. "Me, Nick."

Silence. I let several minutes pass and then beat again with my stone. The voice said, "Go away."

"I'm not going, Uncle Caleb," I said, " and it's no use your saying 'go away.' I'm not going until you let me in or you come out. I won't go away until you've talked to me."

There was silence again for a time, and then I heard bolts being pulled and the snick of the lock. There was a pause, and he said, "All right, you can come in."

I pushed the door open. I saw no one. The doors to the right and left were both closed. From the darkness at the end of the hall he said, "Close the door."

"For Pete's sake, Uncle Caleb," I said. "Light your lamp, first."

"Close it," he said. I pushed it shut and stood there in total darkness. There was an unclassifiable noise and a creak of floorboards, and then I heard the opening of the door of the room on the left. In a moment his voice came from inside the room. "You can light a match, now." It was a strange voice,

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thin, flat, and without overtones, not much louder than a whisper.

The flare of the match showed the door standing open. I moved toward it cautiously. As I entered the room I encountered the smell again, so strong that it almost had to be physically breasted. "Lamp on the table," he said. I located and lit it. The wick was almost burnt out; even turned to the top, it was no brighter than the match had been, and I stood in a tiny island of light, surrounded by impenetrable shadow. His voice came out of the darkness: "What do you want, Nick?"

"I want you to do the right thing, Uncle Caleb," I said. "You know what it is. I've brought the pistol."

I heard a strange little sound that could have been either a whimper or a giggle. "Now why should I do a thing like that?" he said.

"You know why. You knew I'd be here. You were expecting me, weren't you?" He made no answer. I said, "We had an understanding. I believed you, God help me. And now there's another corpse up in town. Or part of a corpse. But it's the last one, Uncle Caleb. You can be very sure that it's the last one."

Silence again, and then the eerie voice out of the shadows: "That's got nothing to do with me. It's the feesters, Nick. The feesters."

"Yes, of course," I said. "But tell me, Uncle Caleb: does it seem to you that you know how it happened? Do you have a picture in your mind — something that seems almost like a memory — of what happened in the parking lot? As though maybe you know what the feesters are doing, are thinking?"

I was being the amateur psychiatrist, but I was at least partly right. He said, "Yes. Yes. Of course. I knew they were going to do it as soon as they started to think about it. I wished they'd stop thinking about it, but they wouldn't. And finally they did it. And it was awful. Nick, it was awful."

"Yes," I said. "You know you're going to have to do it, don't you, Uncle Caleb? You know it's the only thing that will make the feesters stop, don't you?"

There was only silence. I said, "Come out into the light, now, Uncle Caleb. It's time. You know it's time."

I heard it again, then, the noise I had heard in the hall, but still I saw only shadows. And then I looked down.

He was on the floor, wriggling out of the shadows into the small pool of light at my feet, naked, dead-white, moving like a worm on his belly. His arms were held tight against his sides, his legs were squeezed tightly together. He twisted his head to look up at me from the floor, and the wild growth of hair on his head and face, still the same straw color it had always been, looked very dark against his extraordinary pallor. The great round eyes glowed in the faint lamplight like a nocturnal animal's. Within the tangle of facial hair his teeth gleamed in what could have been either a smile or a snarl.

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It was as horrifying a sight as I ever expect to see, both frightening and pitiful; but it was also more than a little ludicrous, and it was that fact that enabled me to hold fast to my resolution and do what had to be done. I said, "Oh, Uncle Caleb." And then: "Here's the gun, Uncle Caleb."

The teeth flashed yellow in the lamplight. "You know I can't use a gun, Nick. I haven't got any hands. Or arms."

"Or legs, I suppose," I said.

"That's right. No arms or legs. But I can get around all right."

"Yes," I said. "I know. You can indeed." I thought about it for a moment. I said, "Do you suppose you could pretend or imagine — just for a minute or so — that you have an arm and a hand? If I left the gun on the floor?"

This time when he spoke the voice had changed; under the toneless quack was a faint ghost of the voice of my own Uncle Caleb, and I swallowed. He said, "No. No. I can't take the gun. But you're right. I've thought about it. The feesters have to be stopped. You'll want to be here won't you. To be sure that I do it. I'll do it now. But another way. Open the door for me, Nick. I can't, you know."

I might have asked him how he had opened it to let me in, but scoring debater points was not what I had come for, and in any case I suppose he would have found the question meaningless. I took the lamp and went to the front door and opened it.

There was a moon at the gibbous stage; it threw a pale oblong of light into the hallway. I extinguished the lamp and went down the steps and a little way out into the weeds. I stood there in the warm night watching the door.

In a little while he came out, a whiteness that bulged suddenly across the threshold and then moved in a silent squirm down the steps and away from the house. And then he was gone, a gleam of white humping with quite astonishing speed in the dim light toward the blackness of the lake. As he reached the edge, I called out, "Goodbye, Uncle Caleb."

There was no reply, only a small splash as the white shape disappeared into the water. And then silence. I walked back to the car and drove into town. On the way I stopped and parked at the side of the road for perhaps half an hour while I gave way to an unseemly emotional fit, howling and weeping and pounding on the steering wheel. When it was over I went to the sheriff's office and reported that I had been to the house, where I had discovered the door standing open and Uncle Caleb nowhere to be found. The sheriff said that he was not surprised and that he would investigate.

He was not surprised, and not much interested, either; and in Sturkeyville the name of Scoggins ended that night as an item of routine police business, a dingy and discreditable end for a proud name. The investigation

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was hasty and perfunctory: an inadequate search of the woods, and an attempt to drag the lake, which proved to be impossible because it was found to be very much deeper than anyone had suspected. A missing-person bulletin was circulated. A watch was kept on the lake for a while, to see if a body would surface, but it never did.

In due course there was a memorial service at St. David's. I sat sedately through it, remembering strange things. Afterward elderly people came to me and talked about the old days, when they and Uncle Caleb were young and the world was bright. Their conventional nostalgia evoked my own memories of enchanted summers on horseback in the hills above Sturkeyville before the shadows closed in upon Uncle Caleb, and an access of regret and grief and guilt seized and shook me. I might reason that what had occurred was no more than the timely suicide of a homicidal maniac, but what I felt was a terrible sense of loss.

I still feel that loss. It is more than a decade, now, since Uncle Caleb died, and I am a man closer to old age than middle, and Sturkeyville itself has changed almost beyond recognition, but I have noticed of late that my reveries increasingly tend to dwell upon those boyhood summers with Uncle Caleb. There is, of course, a proximate cause: it has now become imperative that I decide what I am going to do about the Phillips place and the lake. It will be my decision, and mine alone; I did, in the end, record Uncle Caleb's deed, and the property is mine in fee simple, the land and the lake. But not the house; I had it pulled down after Uncle Caleb's death, and its stones hauled away. The weeds grow uninterrupted now around the silent lake.

I have already consulted the Corps of Engineers and a contractor; the lake can be drained. It can be drained and the mud on its bottom exposed to the sun to dry and bake and crack. And anything buried there in the mud will dry and bake as well, and die, if it is alive.

That is the direction in which my mind has been running, the kind of plans I have been making. Sometimes it seems totally irrational, and indeed almost insane; but then I look at what has begun to happen again in Sturkeyville, and I am persuaded that these things must be done.

There have been more of the murders. They are the same in every respect as those of the past, monstrously savage and gruesome, ghastly rendings and mutilations under midnight rainstorms. The theory is that some unbalanced person was pushed over the edge by reading in a true-crime magazine one of the periodic rehashings of the Sturkeyville Butcher murders. It may be true, I hope so. Another maniac seems more acceptable, somehow, than what I have almost begun to believe.

And so I think I will drain the lake.

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If nothing else, it will free me of the obsessive imaginings that have plagued me since I first heard of the new murders. I am persistently visited by a terrifying picture, a picture of the lake. I see it from the hillside above, as I first saw it with Uncle Caleb. It is night in this picture, a night of violent summer rain, utterly black except for sudden lightning that sporadically freezes the scene in a momentary white glare. The surface of the lake is churned by rain.

In a flash of lightning I discern four white shapes in the water, making for shore. Moments later, in another flash, I see them squirming and humping through the weeds away from the lake, the foremost almost at the tree line. I can give them names: Clio, Thalia, Urania, Polyhymnia.

Their name is Feester. Their name is Death.

And the next flash shows the lake as before, black, rain-lashed, lifeless, waiting. They will come back after they have done what they are setting out to do, wriggling back into the black water, sinking into the depths, burrowing into the mud, deep into the cold mud.

That is the vision that obsesses me. It is obviously egregious nonsense, the sort of thing that could be accepted only by the most credulous and superstitious, and I devoutly wish I could exorcise it. But it will not go away.

It will not go away, and indeed it becomes more elaborate. My imagination, fed no doubt by discreditable suppressed guilts and fears, has given the screw at last an unbearable turn, and now, as I lie tensely in bed or sit in my chair gnawing my knuckles, I have begun to imagine that there are not four shapes exposed by the lightning's glare, but five.

And I will not tolerate that. Uncle Caleb, whatever became of his mind, deserves better of me than that. I will drain the lake. I will drain it down to its bottommost mud. And in that mud we will find Uncle Caleb's bones.

I hope very much we will find Uncle Caleb's bones.

The F&SF Competition (Comp 26, Report on Comp 25) will appear in next month's issue.

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